

Scotpress



ONE
AMONG
YOU

Alinda
Alain

Lee Sullivan

a Star Trek
fanzine

ONE AMONG YOU

by

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

EDITORIAL

We don't often put an editorial on a novel, but in this case we feel that it's quite a good idea.

This story is the first of a series which Alinda has been working on for fully ten years. We hope to print more stories in this series in due course.

Valerie and I both read this story at a sitting, but one question that did occur to us was, how much thought had Alinda given to the background of the Zamarians, her heroine's race. When we asked, we got a 7-page reply detailing the background and culture. So the answer was yes - she had given a lot of thought to it.

She explained that friends who had read early drafts of the story had commented that the story was slowed down by having too much explanation of the Zamarian culture. She had therefore decided to omit most of these explanations, especially since many of them will probably occur naturally in later stories in the series.

In brief, the Zamarian culture is Alinda's development of the situation arising from a horror novel called BETHANY'S SIN and a TV movie called AMAZONS. I don't know if either of these has ever reached Britain. The book concerns a race of female warriors who hate men; most of their male captives were killed, only the bravest and strongest of their captives being kept alive, crippled to prevent their escape, to provide the warriors with fathers for their children - only the girls being allowed to live. The story featured the 'spirits' of a group of Greek Amazons who were destroyed in the days of Greek mythology but which survived in an underground cavern. When this was broken into, the spirits took over the bodies of various women. Of course, they were defeated again, but the spirits lived on in the body of a child.

The film had a situation that was a little more subtle in its implications, the women in this one allowing the men to live provided they didn't interfere with their wives' personal lives - which were devoted to training young females in combat techniques, etc. Again the cult was discovered and 'destroyed', with the spirits surviving in a child.

Alinda postulated that the cult would rise again, but she moved them to a new planet, Zamaria. However, Zamarian society soon became split because some of the women wished to continue the bad old custom of killing (and eating) their male captives and their sons, whereas many of the younger women objected to having the men of their families killed like that. Finally those who wanted to continue the old ways were driven out and imprisoned in the energy barrier at the edge of the galaxy, and the Zamarians, while still a race of warrior women, began to look for ways of becoming more civilised.

Some Zamarians emigrated to Cygnet XIV, which is also a matriarchy, over the years. Cygnet XIV is a member of the Federation; and because the Zamarians are somewhat sensitive about their history becoming known, and are not yet members of the Federation, it is necessary for any of their people who wish to join Starfleet to become naturalised Cygnetians.

The Z'N family is descended from an early leader, an entity called Zamara, and is mentally the most powerful family on Zamaria.

We hope you enjoy this story as much as we did. Now come on, Alinda - where's the next one???

ONE AMONG YOU

PROLOGUE

Two women stood side by side on an apartment terrace in the Personnel Living Quarters Section of Starbase II.

One was dark-haired, with an air of quiet, efficient maturity about her. From the female-dominated planet Cygnet XIV, she was known in Federation and Starfleet records as 'Number One'. Only a few knew her private name, a privilege reserved for family and close friends.

The other woman, a tall, slender, well-muscled girl, addressed Number One. "Well, tomorrow is the day, E'mar."

"Indeed," Number One replied, her dark eyes raised to the stars.

"You miss them, don't you?" the girl observed.

"Yes."

"Why did you leave?"

"Necessary," Number One said automatically, still gazing at the stars. Then her eyes shifted to the girl. "Besides, I had to prepare the way for you, Zsa. Didn't your sister fill you in on the details of why you had to take Cygnetian citizenship and join Starfleet?"

"All I know is that Gaezara wishes me to babysit some Starship crew she became fond of a few years back."

Number One nodded, a smile of fondness in her eyes. "The Enterprise."

"Your ship?"

"Yes. Mine... and Captain Pike's."

"Your Captain."

"My Captain," Number One confirmed quietly.

"Where is he now?"

"Content," was all Number One would say, knowing that Chris Pike's location was top secret.

"And his successor is this famous womaniser, James T. Kirk." Zsazara's tone held obvious disdain.

"Your Zamarian prejudice is showing, dear," Number One reproved gently.

Zsazara laughed softly. "Sorry. Every once in a while my veneer of 'civilisation' slips."

"See that you keep those slips to a minimum aboard the Enterprise or both your sister and I will have your crown."

"Yes, Teacher," Zsazara promised respectfully.

"An adult gives obedience to her elders and to her superiors

regardless of their gender. Respect for all and service to mankind are the new tenets of Zamarian society."

"I will remember, Teacher."

"I hope so," Number One murmured, placing a sisterly arm about Zsazara.

Commodore Jose I. Mendez sat at his desk in his office the next morning, reviewing the orders he had received from Command Central concerning the young woman seated in the guest chair to his left - a very beautiful girl, without question, what with those silver strands creating a crown effect in that severe bun hairstyle. Severe, like her features; lovely, but set in an expression that would do a Vulcan proud. It was hard to believe that she was a top-notch security officer.

"It won't be long now, Ensign Z'N," Mendez addressed her.

"No, sir. One minute, five seconds - provided they are on schedule.

"I suspect they will be. The First Officer of the Enterprise is a Vulcan, you know. You and he should get along well."

The Ensign made no reply to that.

Right on schedule two figures, familiar to Mendez, were escorted into the Commodore's office.

"Hello, Jose," Captain Kirk greeted his old friend.

"Jim," the Commodore greeted with equal cordiality. "Mr. Spock."

"Commodore," the Vulcan responded formally.

Mendez eyed Spock a moment longer, recalling the trouble the Vulcan had caused the last time he had been on the Starbase. Then he introduced the 'Cygnesian'.

"How's the new security chief doing, Jim?" Mendez inquired when he had everyone seated.

"Very well. She was my old security chief's best student and then his best officer. She's a bit rough round the edges, but promising," Kirk assured.

"She's quite an eyesful, I'm told," the Commodore commented to his fellow Human, forgetting for a moment the presence of the two nonHumans.

"Yes. She's a good officer," was all Kirk would say. He had noticed an odd glint in the ensign's dark eyes at Mendez's comment.

Spock, too, seemed to have sensed something amiss. He was also studying the young woman, noticing especially the non-regulation crystal

jewellery around her neck and wrists, almost hidden though it was by her red tunic.

That jewellery...

The Vulcan shivered, feeling unaccountably disturbed by the crystals... or was it the woman herself?

Abruptly the feeling faded, and Spock refocused his attention on the Humans' conversation.

"As you know, the next twelve months will mark the end of the Enterprise's current five-year mission. For the duration of that time, you will be assigned to the North Quadrant. There have been strange reports of unexplained happenings in that area involving the Klingons and the Romulans. The Federation has made contact with some prospective member planets out there; we don't want them frightened off or molested."

"That area is near the energy barrier, isn't it?" Kirk recalled.

"Yes. But you shouldn't have to worry about it this time. Officially you'll be in the area star mapping."

Kirk nodded, and glanced at the Ensign.

Mendez noted the Captain's expression and interpreted it correctly. "Ms. Z'N is reported to be familiar with Quadrant North, its star systems and planetary centres of possible life forms. Or so Number One, this young lady's mentor, assures me."

"Number One?" Spock lifted an eyebrow in surprise and recognition.

"Yes, Mr. Spock. I believe you and she served together under Chris Pike for a number of years."

The Vulcan automatically gave the exact length of time right down to the days and minutes.

"Er... yes, Mr. Spock. Number One is here on the base, if you would like to see her," Mendez offered. "She's an instructor of security procedures."

"Thank you, Commodore," Spock said, deciding that he would indeed like to see Number One again.

Kirk eyed his First Officer curiously, but the Vulcan now wore his most unreadable mask.

"Well, Jose - if there's nothing else..." Kirk rose to his feet, as did Spock and Z'N.

Kirk waved the Vulcan and the Cygnetian towards the door and hung back as Mendez came around the desk to stand close beside him.

"How about dinner this evening, Jim?" Mendez said in a low voice.

"Why, Jose, I didn't know you missed me that much," Kirk teased.

"Indeed I have. I haven't had a decent date since the last time you were here, Jimmy boy. Rank may have its privileges, but you above all seem to have whatever it takes to attract the prettiest ladies." He draped an arm about Kirk's shoulders. "Find a pretty lady for me

tonight, will you, old friend?"

Kirk laughed. "Ah, Jose. You sure know how to flatter a lowly Starship Captain. I'll see what I can do."

The Captain moved to join Spock and Z'N, wondering what Uhura and Christine might have planned for the evening. If they had other plans, perhaps Lt. Marlana Moreau and Dr. Ann Mulhall might be available...

That evening, while the Captain, McCoy and others of the senior officers got together with Commodore Mendez for an evening on the base, Spock visited Number One.

The room of his former First Officer was much like any other on the base, with the exception of personal touches made by the occupant. The sleeping quarters took up one side, while a desk and sitting area filled the opposite end where a large wrap-around picture window gave a splendid view of the base layout and the night sky.

She sat in a large, dark armchair gazing out the window. The room was dimly lit. She had not turned around to greet him, but he took no offence. They were old friends.

"Greetings, Spock." Her deep voice floated through the dimness and touched him.

He walked over to stand beside her. "Greetings, E'mar. I trust all is well with you?"

"All is well," she assured.

The conversation then took on the tone of remembrances and exchange of news between old friends. Out of courtesy for his hostess, as well as the pleasure of exercising a rarely-used tongue, he spoke in the Cygnetian language.

"Your Captain - and the Chief Surgeon. Are they well, Spock?" Number One finally drew the conversation back to the present.

"Yes."

"The fame of the Enterprise's family of senior officers is the pride of Starfleet."

"Indeed," was the Vulcan's neutral response. He sensed her curiosity, and correctly anticipated her next question.

"James Kirk. He has been good for you, charmar?" 'Charmar' was a Cygnetian word denoting a youth, a person who has yet to reach maturity.

For an instant, Spock hesitated, but he knew he must reply if he wanted his own curiosity satisfied.

"Yes, E'mar. James Kirk is friend, brother and teacher," he confided, adding, "as I am to him."

The silver starlight glinted off the dark of her hair as Number One nodded. "Good. It was Christopher's and my hope that you would find belonging and peace some day."

"The thoughts of those who taught me much honours me deeply," Spock

said formally. And now that it was proper - "Your protege, E'mar. Who is she?"

Number One took several minutes before answering. "Zsazara. A most exceptional student. Her skills are incredible. She should made a good asset to Starfleet's finest crew."

"Indeed." Spock waited, but she said no more. So he continued. "I have studied Cygnesian customs; styles, ornamentations. Also Cygnesian XVI's geology. Never have I come across mention of crystals like those worn by Ensign Z'N."

Again there was a moment of silence.

At last - "The liabs are to Zsazara what the Guardian Fire Statue is to you, Spock."

Now it was the Vulcan's turn to be silent.

"I strongly suggest that you include her in all your off-ship activity in Quadrant North," Number One advised quietly.

Spock lifted an eyebrow, but all other questions were politely detoured.

Zsazara, aboard the Enterprise, put away her personal belongings. She had been assigned to share quarters with the security chief, D'Lorraine Larzen, a tall, medium-weight woman with silver-blond hair and penetrating ice-blue eyes. Satisfied that all was in its proper place, Zsazara sat cross-legged upon her bed and examined her liabs - the specially designed psionic jewellery of control for her species.

There were things about her that even E'mar did not fully comprehend. Her liabs were now attuned to James Kirk and Spock. Next, she must visit Leonard McCoy in Sickbay - and later, if necessary, Montgomery Scott in Engineering.

Four males, strong of mind. That should be sufficient control for a warrior of her youth, even a Z'N.

"Have no fear, my Teacher," Zsazara whispered. "Four Father/Brothers of noble spirit will surely keep my own volatile nature at peace."

Already, she was beginning to feel better about this assignment. Uncrossing her legs, she rose to her feet, stretching lazily, catlike. It was time she familiarised herself with her new home and its inhabitants in her own way.

Zsazara moved towards the door and stepped out into the corridors of the Enterprise.

Within the week, the Enterprise entered Quadrant North. The new security ensign had settled into ship routine well enough. Security chief D'Lorraine Larzen had apparently found a kindred spirit in the Cygnesian girl. The two had become friends, spending off-duty time together, often in the company of Uhura and Christine Chapel.

Kirk, returning from his habitual midnight stroll through his

metallic lady, walked towards his cabin. All would have been well in his mind had it not been for the nightmares.

They had begun shortly after the Enterprise had left Starbase II. While alone in his cabin, Kirk sometimes felt as if he was being watched, almost touched, by an unseen presence. And when he slept, he dreamed...

First, the presence - somehow familiar, yet hostile - would be there, close beside him. A humanoid figure, vague, indistinct, silvery.

Then Kirk would find himself on the bridge of the Enterprise, ordering a landing party down to an alien planet. All would go well for a time. Then, suddenly, for no reason, everyone in the landing party died.

At this point, every time, Kirk would wake up, suppressing a scream and drenched in cold sweat.

If it came again tonight, he would report to McCoy.

Later that same evening, in his quarters, Spock disengaged the computer terminal on the desk, and steepled his long fingers before his face in preparation for meditation. Since it was third shift and most of the crew asleep, freeing subliminal levels of awareness from much clutter, he felt safe in relaxing his mental shields for a moment or two.

He was thus occupied when the Captain's mental distress hit him full force.

"Jim!" he exclaimed and was out of the door and headed for the Captain's quarters on the run.

With a moan, Kirk sat up and ran a hand through his damp hair. It took a full minute before the persistent buzz of the door chime filtered through to his mind.

He stepped the door release.

Spock stepped in. "Captain." The Vulcan's expression was set in its usual mask of nonemotion, but the dark eyes were clouded with concern.

"Come in. I was about to call you." Kirk rolled off the bed to his feet and motioned the Vulcan to a seat.

For a few seconds, they sat facing each other. Hazel eyes met dark.

He and the Vulcan had been together as a team for a long time. They knew each other far better than most people knew themselves.

Together they were the pride of Starfleet Command. Together they complemented the weaknesses in their respective personalities to create a formidable strength. Together they had faced the worst in each other's characters and emerged, brothers-of-the-soul.

"How long has this been going on?" the Vulcan enquired.

"The last three nights," Kirk answered. "The dream seems to be strengthening in intensity - and reality. I can't stop the events I see, and more and more I find it difficult to pull away from it."

"Have you spoken to McCoy?"

"I intend to. Tomorrow morning."

The Vulcan nodded, the expression in his eyes thoughtful. Kirk watched him expectantly.

"We will wait for Dr. McCoy's test results," Spock said finally.

"O.K." Kirk cocked his head and rubbed his chin absently. "Are you thinking about a mind-link if Bones finds nothing?"

"Yes." The Vulcan shifted slightly.

"You know, Spock, you don't always have to wait for a crisis to touch my mind." Kirk smiled, beginning to relax in the presence of the Vulcan's soothing company. "There's still that blocking technique against the Klingon mind-sifter you need to teach me."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Indeed, Captain, should circumstances ever place you in such a situation, I strongly suggest you contact me at once. I will take care of blocking the mind-sifter. Not you. Such an attempt would leave you a mindless vegetable in two point five minutes."

Kirk groaned. "I thought my mind and will were stronger than that."

"Not that strong. Not without special training or support."

The Captain shrugged, and attempted to suppress a yawn - without success. "Well, I guess we'd both better get some sleep." Another yawn. He eyed Spock suspiciously. "You aren't using some kind of subliminal sleep-suggestion on me, are you, Mister?"

Spock rose to his feet, assuming a stance of strictest dignity. "Captain! Of course not." The dark eyes twinkled.

Kirk moved round the desk to walk the Vulcan to the door. "Sometimes I think we're a bit too attuned to each other."

Spock stiffened slightly, glancing at him questioningly.

"Only kidding," Kirk assured, and was relieved to see the lean form relax.

Friendship as deep and strong as they shared was a new and special experience for Spock, who was always fearful of overstepping some arbitrary boundary; therefore he had chosen to let Kirk dictate the limits and rules governing their relationship. It was a right he felt the Human to have because of Kirk's Terran background and experience in such matters, as well as his respect for Kirk's rank.

"I interrupted your meditation," Kirk continued. "Sorry."

Spock shrugged. "Easily remedied."

"Well..." Kirk stretched lazily. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night, Captain. Sleep well."

"Thanks. I believe I will."

And he did, but he still felt it wise to report to McCoy the next morning.

Zsazara was an early riser. In fact, she was capable of going several weeks without what Humans called rest and sleep. It had been necessary for her to slow down her metabolism to accommodate Federation medical equipment and physicals. Even so, vigorous workouts in the gym always helped expend any excess energy.

Two hours before her shift, the Cygnetian was enjoying her four hundredth lap around the pool.

"Hey, Beautiful!" a man's voice called from the end of the pool opposite her location. Zsazara paused in mid-stroke, rolled over onto her back to peer back at the speaker. "Don't you ever run out of energy?"

She swam towards him, her dark eyes examining him curiously.

DePaul, she recalled from the ship's personnel files. A navigator.

He was tall, dark and handsome in a way that strongly reminded Zsazara of her sister's husband, Jo'l.

"I've watched you for almost an hour," he said, reaching down a hand to help her out of the water. "You haven't rested once."

Zsazara hesitated a moment before accepting the hand. "My endurance is exceptional," she admitted, allowing him to drape a towel about her shoulders. "Part of my training."

He smiled, an expression which made his classic features all the more attractive. "And, of course, being a woman - and an incredibly beautiful one at that - you have to be an overachiever to be taken seriously."

She laughed. "How did you know that?"

"I've known Dee since our days at the Academy." He used the security chief's nickname, a right permitted her friends. "How is she as a room-mate? Is she riding you very hard?"

Zsazara moved towards the shower units. He followed.

"Dee and I are quite compatible."

"Hmmm."

She stopped just outside the shower units and faced him. "You sound displeased."

He shrugged. "It's not that I'm displeased. It's just that... Well, has Dee talked to you about me?"

"No. Is there some reason she would want to do so?"

He drew back slightly, obviously offended by her disinterested tone. "Oh. All right. Just forget that I bothered you." He turned away and started to leave.

Almost without thought, Zsazara reached out, catching his wrist. She was under strict orders to be civil. Besides, she realised after a moment, he was warm and strong to the touch. And very much alive.

"Hey!" He winced at her grip. Quickly, she released her hold. "That's quite a grip you have there. Where did you get that kind of strength?"

"I was born with it."

"Oh, yes. I almost forgot. You're not an Earth woman. You're from Cygnet XIV, where the women run things." He paused, considered a moment, then decided to get to the point. "I've heard that Cygnetians are lesbians."

"Some are. And some are not."

"Which are you?"

"I am not. All that I am is a warrior-apprentice. I am a protector. It is the whole focus of my being."

"Oh," he murmured, not quite sure if he understood. "Then you aren't interested in men?"

"On the contrary. I find men a most interesting study."

For a moment they just looked into each other's eyes. But such customs tended to make Zsazara impatient.

"You desire to 'court' me. Correct?" she asked him.

"Er.. well... yes. I do." He reached out and began to dry her off with the towel about her shoulders.

"What is your private name, DePaul?"

"Sean." His blue eyes examined her solemn features. "Does this mean I can hope?" The ship's grapevine already had the Cygnetian labelled as a 'freezer unit', which had prompted his question about her sexual preference.

"Yes. You may *hope*," she answered him. It was not difficult to read his mind and she marvelled at this Human need to know another's sexual practices. She had encountered it several times since enrolling in the Academy. She often wondered what the Humans would say if she revealed that on her real homeworld of Zamaria sex was part of the life of a relative few of the population and totally nonexistent among the majority of Zamarians due to the rarity of the male gender in their species. And while Lesbianism was perfectly accepted among Cygnetians, it was perfectly unaccepted among Zamarians.

"However, Lt. DePaul, *sir*, I would prefer that you make some effort to govern your thoughts better if we are to spend any amount of time in each other's company."

"Huh?" He frowned, confused.

"Freezer unit. Is that a term of compliment?"

"How did you... I mean... Are you a telepath or something?" he demanded uneasily.

"Or something." She smiled at him. "But in your case it is not necessary for me to read your mind. Your eyes and expressions have a language of their own."

Her comments seemed to please him greatly. He put on his most charming of smiles and reached to caress her lips with his fingertips. She caught and held the hand away from her.

"Another point we need to make clear. I am not a Human female. There is much in your courtship rituals which I neither understand nor approve. I can make no promise to submit to all of them."

DePaul's charming expression changed to that of irritation. For a long moment she expected him to lose interest and walk away. Instead, he assumed an air of masculine confidence. The charming smile returned as he said, "Have you ever tried any of those courtship rituals?"

"No. I have only observed."

"Then let it be known here and now that I'm available if and when you are ready to experiment, Beautiful." He lifted a corner to the towel to dry her brow. Again she reflected on how much he reminded her of her brother-in-law.

And for a crazy instant, Zsazara even toyed with the idea of taking him in her arms and kissing him. But *no*, she decided. It would be wiser to get to know him first; for often it was that a beautiful face and body hid an unpleasant personality.

Instead, Zsazara smiled back at the Human, pulled the towel out of his hands - gently - and entered the shower compartment. Before closing the door, she looked back and promised, "I will meditate on the matter and let you know. Good day, Sean."

DePaul remained standing before the closed door for a moment. Finally a slow smile of triumph spread across his face. His name on Zsazara's lips definitely held promise. And she had called him 'Sean'. He turned and walked out of the gym.

The newlyweds, Yo-Ma Zito and Elizabeth Zito (formerly McCraggins) strolled hand in hand through the corridors of the Enterprise, giggling like kids and murmuring sweet nothings into each other's ears.

"Can't you two find some place better for such carrying on?"

The couple jumped and looked around.

"DePaul," Zito growled. "You just scared us out of five years of growth."

The tall navigator moved out of the shadows of the alcove to join them. "Well, I hear that the best way to grow old is with the one you love," he drawled, for he was not a believer in long-standing sexual relationships.

The couple smiled, their hands tightly clasped. "True. Very true," they answered DePaul, seemingly oblivious of his sarcasm.

"That's exactly what we plan to do," Zito assured.

DePaul grinned and moved forward to put a companionable arm about

each officer's shoulders. Privately, he wished them luck, but felt them to be unrealistic. Both were security specialists, and everyone knew that the survival statistics weren't good in such a dangerous occupation. It was far better to be like him; to play it light and loose, to live for the moment with no long-term promises and attachments.

"Sean!" Yo grated under his breath, digging an elbow into the navigator's side for emphasis. "If you don't mind..." His expression conveyed clearly that he wanted to be alone with his wife.

"Oh. Yes. Sure. Of course. Sorry." DePaul let his arms drop. "I'll be on my way." He started away, then paused a moment to make the announcement. "I almost forgot. You know that pretty Cygnetian that just joined the crew?"

"Yeah," Zito said, exchanging glances with Beth. DePaul was a well-known 'ladies' man', having approached practically every woman in the crew at one time or another.

"Well, the Cygnetian and I will soon be an 'item'."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Beth declared. She had thought Zsazara to be more perceptive than to be taken in by the likes of DePaul. The Cygnetian was a nice kid, in her opinion, but obviously inexperienced with men. The girl had the makings of a promising security officer. It was already ship news that Zsazara had lightning quick reflexes and fighting skills. The girl had taken out two of security's biggest and most skilled operatives in less than five minutes. That was an impressive feat and Beth had no intention of letting such potential be ruined by the likes of DePaul. She determined to speak with Zsazara at the first opportunity.

"And 'see it' you shall," DePaul promised and continued on down the corridor, whistling, his manner confident and lofty.

"That man is a menace," Beth declared vehemently.

"I couldn't agree more," said her husband.

They merely looked at each other for a long moment. Zito slipped an arm about her waist. "You know, DePaul was right about one thing."

"Oh? And what was that?"

"There are better places for our 'carrying ons'." He grinned. "How about the herbarium? We could programme the environment for a little moonlight on the beach."

Beth's green eyes lit with interest. "That sounds like a wonderful idea." She kissed him, murmuring, "I sure wish I could have known what a romantic I'd been partnering for the last year. I would never have waited so long to notice you."

"Uh humm," Zito responded. "But what could a guy like me expect with such masculine ideals as Sean, the Captain, Mr. Spock or Pavel..."

"Yo! Really! I wasn't that bad." She paused, looking at him seriously. "Was I? I mean, it *is* my job to stay close to the one I'm assigned to guard."

Zito reached up to put back in place a strand of her fiery red hair. "No. You were never that bad. You've always been special in my

eyes, Beth. That's why I felt safe in letting you notice me on your own."

She laughed, reaching up to unclasp her hair and let it fall about her shoulder. "Why bother to put it back in place?" She took his hand and kissed his fingers. "It'll just be getting all mussed up again when we get to the herbarium."

"Yeah."

Arm in arm, the couple walked down the corridor towards the herbarium.

Three days later, the Enterprise put into orbit around a Class M planet in the star system known to the Federation as Epsilon Cephei. The sun had eight satellites, with number seven being the only one close to Terran norm.

During that time, McCoy had given Kirk a complete physical and a thorough mind scan. Nothing unusual had been found, and thanks to Spock and some Vulcan science of mind techniques, the Captain had had three restful nights of sleep.

Nevertheless, a spark of uneasiness still disturbed Kirk. Perhaps a change of scenery... like the lovely green planet circling below the ship.

"Have you finished those landing party assignments, Spock?" Kirk enquired from the command chair. Yeoman Tamara stood nearly on his left, with a status report for him to sign. He took it, scribbled his signature and handed it back, then watched the lovely brunette as she walked away. The little lady had quite a figure and a most delightful wiggle in her walk.

"Of course, Captain," the Vulcan answered. "Assignments were finished five minutes ago."

"Good. Which group is going down near the beach front?"

"Dr. Merrill of oceanography heads the party beaming down to the beach. Officer Elizabeth Zito is in charge of security."

"Beth. Our newlywed." Kirk grinned. He'd married the couple himself. Also, Beth and he were good friends. The spunky little redhead had even saved his life a few times. "I'll be going down with that group, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan lifted a questioning eyebrow.

Kirk got up and walked over to stand by the science station. "I feel in need of a walk," he said by way of explanation. "Along a beach sounds like the perfect place." He grinned at Spock's tolerant expression of indulgence. "This Starship Captain is in need of some fresh air."

"Understood, sir."

Kirk nodded. "Take care of my lady." He straightened and moved towards the turbolift.

"Acknowledged, Captain." The Vulcan followed Kirk with his eyes,

debating whether or not to invite himself along.

No, he decided. *Better not.* Kirk might try to persuade him to do something outrageous, like go for a swim or surfing. Neither activity was particularly appealing to a desert-born individual.

As the lift doors closed, Spock got up and stepped down to take his place in the command chair.

"Hey, Beautiful!" DePaul blocked Zsazara's path to the turbolift on deck five.

"Hello, Sean. I don't have time to chat. I'm due in the transporter room in six minutes," she told him, trying to move past him.

DePaul caught her shoulders, holding her in front of him. "Zsa. How much longer is this going to go on?" His normally easy-going nature was at the moment quite serious.

"How much longer is *what* going to go on?"

"This leading me on. This being together but not 'being together'."

Zsazara sighed, reached up and pulled his hands gently away from her shoulders. She had not needed that little girl-to-girl talk Beth and Dee had both felt it wise to give her. True, she had little or no 'emotional/romantic' experience with men, but that did not mean that she was completely blind to the ways of the opposite gender. She was reasonably familiar with many of their manipulative techniques and motives, and had known from the start that DePaul was only interested in her as a hard-to-get bed partner, as a lovely 'prize' to be won, bragged about - and eventually discarded.

"Sean - I told you, I am on duty now. We will talk later." Zsazara stepped past him and walked briskly towards the turbolift.

Dova - the name her people called the Epsilon Cephei's seventh satellite - was like most things in this part of the galaxy; deceptively beautiful and very deadly. Fortunately, the natives of Dova were beyond the ship's sensor range when inactive, which was the case during the planet's daylight hours. And should the landing parties still be on the planet when night came, the psionic energy of her liahs would be sufficient to keep them in their lairs. For in this part of the galaxy, all the inhabitants knew the power of a Zamarian warrior.

"Zsa!" DePaul hurried after her. "Get Shelly to take your place. We need to talk right now."

"Sean, why do I have to repeat myself so much with you? Don't you ever believe what I say?" She didn't slow her pace. It was vital that she be among the first to beam down, especially before the Captain.

"Zsa. Beautiful. You're just not being reasonable." DePaul followed her into the turbolift. "It's just not normal for two people so attracted to each other not to sleep together."

"Sleep is not what you want us to be together for, Sean. I warned you from the first. I am not oriented towards life in the same manner as a Human female. I am a warrior, not a pleasure unit. I don't indulge in casual, superficial pleasure. So - unless you're talking

commitment and permanence, we have nothing more to say to each other."

"Don't give me that line. I've noticed you watching me. You want me as much as I want you."

"Perhaps." Her tone was noncommittal. "I find you attractive, even desirable physically, Sean. But that is as far as it goes."

"Well, that's enough for now. Zsa, come on, be realistic. In your line of work dreams of permanence are just that - dreams. Out here we all have to live for the moment."

Zsazara sighed. "You miss the point, Sean. For me, the intimacy which you desire so casually is a precious, vital part of my self makeup. To tamper with it on a whim or just because it satisfies the senses for a moment is like flying into a star just because I'm cold in space. Such an act would warm me immensely. But shortly thereafter, it would also consume me utterly."

"Oh, drop the analogies!" DePaul growled.

"All right. I will put it bluntly. You are beautiful, Sean DePaul, but only physically. Beyond that, Sean, I don't know you - not the real you - assuming that there is more to you than this 'sexual playboy' mode you seem almost always to be in."

"Why don't you stop analysing me, lady? What are you so defensive about?" DePaul returned angrily. "What are you so afraid of? Why do you deny your feelings?"

Zsazara looked up at him. He was a full six-foot-one to her five-feet-eleven inches. "I am denying nothing. As for fear..." She paused, reached up to touch his lips with her fingers. "The only thing I fear is myself, Sean. Emotions run deep in my people. If I took you and you disappointed me - which you would as you are now - I'd probably kill you," she told him with quiet sincerity.

The turbolift doors opened on deck seven, and Zsazara stepped out, leaving DePaul standing open-mouthed in the elevator, staring after her.

In the transporter room, Kirk and Beth Zito exchanged greetings.

"Are the other landing parties reporting in?" The Captain turned to speak into the intercom on the console unit.

"Yes, Captain," came Spock's reply from the bridge. Already on the planet were four six-member teams, each assigned to a particular environment noted in the geography.

"Very good. Thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk ended communications and led the way to the transporter platform.

Security specialists Ryan Hope and Talla Hones, and the three scientists were beamed down; then Beth took her place on the transporter discs beside the Captain.

Security chief Larzen stood near the console beside the transporter technician, an unhappy frown on her lovely face. She didn't like the idea of the Captain beaming down before her. But Ensign Z'N, the last member of the Chief's beamdown team, was thirty seconds away from being late. Also the Captain, himself, tended to become annoyed at any

obvious attempts on her part to protect him - like having a security team check out an area for danger before letting him or any of the other senior officers beam down. It was a perfectly sensible precaution to Larzen's mind, but one which James T. Kirk ignored with almost reckless abandon sometimes.

"Energise!" Kirk called to the technician at the controls just as Ensign Z'N arrived.

The sparkle of dematerialisation began - and Kirk and the others gaped in amazement at the Ensign's sudden cry of alarm.

"Captain! No! Wait! You must not go!"

Z'N ran to the console, pushing the technician aside. But it was too late. The landing party disappeared.

"Zsa! What's wrong with you?" Larzen demanded as the Cygnetian frantically reversed the controls.

"Oh, no!" Zsazara groaned, her jewellery pulsating wildly.

"Zsa!" Larzen tried again, but at that moment the Enterprise began to shudder violently, throwing crewmen around like rag dolls.

On the planet, the beauty of the landscape was marred for the landing party as the group materialised upon unstable ground.

"Earthquake!" Beth exclaimed.

"Merciful Creator!" screamed Dr. Merrill, pointing in the direction of the ocean.

A huge wall of water was hurling towards them.

Kirk pulled out his communicator, even as he struggled to stay on his feet. "Enterprise! Kirk to Enterprise! Beam us up!"

There was no response.

The group turned and ran, even though they knew it was hopeless.

"Enterprise!" Kirk kept trying.

"Captain! Come, sir!" Beth grabbed Kirk by the arm, hurrying him away from the wall of raging water. Their only hope lay in reaching higher ground where they could be seen; half an hour earlier, one of the shuttles had been sent down in this general area. The pilot should be aware of their plight and be looking for them.

"Kirk to research shuttle Inquirer!" The Captain exchanged a meaningful glance with Beth, as if he had read her mind.

"It's our only chance, sir!" she panted as they began to climb up the rocky embankment.

Zsazara cursed herself, DePaul, and emotions in general as she tried vainly to counter the power that had gripped the Enterprise. But its grip was too intense and she was unprepared. Her body rebelled

against the counter force her mind generated against the malignant enemy on Dova. So did her liahs, whose pulsations indicated that the energy levels were rising too high to accommodate the Human lives around her.

Sensing that continued resistance would result in disaster for all, Zsazara ceased her efforts.

It was at that moment, when the Cygnetian's defences were lowering, that a piece of equipment ripped itself from its straps and slammed against Zsazara's head.

She fell, darkness enveloping her.

The turbulence around the starship increased. A silver blue flash of light enveloped it and the Enterprise vanished.

Rematerialisation took place less than one kilometer from contact with the energy barrier, that unexplained phenomenon of multi-hued fields of force at the galaxy's edge.

Larzen, badly banged up, struggled to a sitting position and looked around. Others stirred, groaning in pain and confusion. All except the Cygnetian, who lay motionless and pale.

"Zsa," Larzen whispered urgently, putting out a hand to touch the girl. Instantly, the security chief pulled back as a crackle of electric energy flared about the Cygnetian's body.

"What in creation is going on?" she exclaimed, cradling burned fingers.

On the bridge, Spock helped Uhura back into her chair. "Are you all right, Lieutenant?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," the communications officer nodded, pushing a strand of hair out of her face. "I think so. But... what happened?"

"A very good question," Spock commented, moving towards his science console.

Sulu and Chekov climbed back into their seats at navigation/helm control.

"Mr. Spock!" Uhura gasped, pointing at the viewscreen.

All eyes turned to the bridge viewscreen.

Gone was the Class M planet and the Epsilon Cephei star system. In its place was the forbidding shimmering veil of the energy barrier.

"How did we get all the way here?" Sulu wondered aloud. "And in one piece at that?"

Spock instructed Uhura to activate the intercom unit connecting him to engineering. "Mr. Scott, engine status report."

"Aye, Mr. Spock," came Scott's agitated reply.

Light years away, back on the planet, Kirk and his landing party had been picked up at the last second by the Inquirer. Crowded though it was, the shuttle had begun looking for the other survey teams shortly thereafter, circling the planet but finding no trace of life at all.

"This doesn't make any sense," Dr. Merrill muttered. "A Class M planet with absolutely no animal life..."

"Animal life?" Beth retorted. "Where are our people? That's all I'm interested in right now!"

"Maybe it's another shore leave type planet," the co-pilot, Esteban Roderiguez, suggested. "You know, an amusement park like the one in the Omicron Delta region. Maybe our people are all safe underground."

Roderiguez's wishful thinking was interrupted by a groan from the back of the shuttle. Concern filled each crewman's eyes as all turned towards the sound.

"How's the Captain?" Beth asked Merrill.

"A slight concussion, I think," she answered. The Captain had been injured by flying debris as a result of his insistence on being the last to board the shuttle. "I detect no internal damage. We just need to keep him quiet for a day or two and he should be fine."

"In order to accomplish that, we will have to sedate him," Beth declared. "You know as well as I what will happen when he realises that the other landing parties - and the ship - are missing."

Merrill nodded grimly, as familiar with the Captain's psychological profile as the security specialist.

As acting chief of security for the group, Beth Zito moved to check the sensors and glance out the viewport. "We've got to find out what happened to the others," she said determinedly, for soon they would have to land the shuttle. It would be best to know what danger awaited them.

Normal functioning had finally been restored to the Enterprise.

On the bridge, tension had lessened somewhat. Spock, subliminally aware of Kirk's continued existence, radiated a calm that reassured the bridge crew, who in turn communicated the same assurance to the rest of the ship's personnel.

Uhura turned from her board.

"Mr. Spock, Ensign Z'N is in sickbay. Dr. McCoy reports that she's in a coma." Her voice held undisguised concern. She, along with Chapel and Larzen, had become rather fond of the alien girl.

Spock lifted a surprised eyebrow and activated the intercom switch. The Ensign was supposed to be on the planet with the Captain and the others. "Spock to sickbay."

"Sickbay. McCoy here. What do you want, Spock? I'm busy."

"Report on casualties."

"Minor, except for Ensign Z'N. She's got a head injury and has been unconscious since the turbulence. I can't examine her properly, however, thanks to that blasted jewellery she has on. It's got my instruments going crazy. I can't get any clear readings on her condition." There was a slight hesitation. "Spock - she's got some kind of field about her body. Only I can touch her. Everyone else receives a strong electric shock when they try."

"Fascinating," was the Vulcan's only response.

After a moment, McCoy's voice came again, quiet and meaningful. "Anything on Jim?"

"He lives, Doctor," the Vulcan replied in the same quiet tone.

"Do you have any theories on what happened to us yet?"

"Nothing confirmed, but I suspect a similar occurrence to that encountered with the Kalandans' technology."

McCoy groaned inwardly, remembering the nightmare experience he, Kirk and Sulu had endured on an artificial planet created by an advanced but dead alien science.

"How soon before we get back to the planet?" the doctor wanted to know.

"Barring complications and/or interference, I estimate seven point eight hours."

The shuttle Inquirer landed in a barren landscape. It was a place of red igneous rock with splatterings of vegetation here and there.

"At least nothing can fall on us if there's any more aftershocks," Obec, who had chosen the spot, explained. "Also we can take off in a hurry if necessary."

Beth nodded absently at the pilot's conversation, her eyes following the pacing figure of their Captain.

"Do you think the ship has been destroyed, Lt. Zito?" one of the security ensigns asked Beth.

Beth took a moment to answer, still not used to thinking of herself by her husband's name. "No. The ship is intact." Her answer was firm.

"But... how can you be so sure?"

She turned to meet the young man's gaze. He was Ryan Hope, cousin to co-worker and friend Shelly Hope. "I'd know if something had happened to Yo. By the way, call me Lieutenant or Mr. McCraggins. Not Zito. I'm not officially that in Starfleet yet."

"Er... yes, ma'am. Er... yes, sir,"

She smiled at the young man's nervousness.

"I, too, would know if anything had happened to Angela." Esteban Roderiguez joined the conversation. He spoke of his wife of three years.

Ryan Hope, new to the Enterprise - he had only been aboard for six months - nodded in comprehension. "I've been told lots of stories about the special rapport that exists among the crew and command personnel of the Enterprise." At the puzzled looks of his seniors, he explained. "My cousin Shel. She's told me about ship life, especially about the Captain, Commander Spock and Dr. McCoy, and others who seem to have a special way of knowing what's happening to each other, even over long distances without any outward forms of communication."

"Hmmm. Yes," Beth murmured, her thoughts reaching out towards the ship and her husband. IF only they had that mysterious mental gift called telepathy between them! Then she and Yo could communicate in more than feelings and hopes for the well-being of each other!

James Kirk stood on a nearby mound, watching his people. That is, what was left of his people. Nine souls out of four hundred and thirty. And among those missing - Spock. McCoy. Scott. Uhura. Friends - brothers, sisters; his crew, his family. His responsibility.

A heavy weight of gloom and loss settled about him, even as darkness fell.

No. He fought the gloom. *They are not lost or dead. They and I have merely been separated - temporarily.* He found it necessary to repeat the last word to himself over and over as the feelings of loss intensified.

"Captain."

He looked around. Dr. Merrill came up to stand by him. She was a good-looking woman with blonde hair and blue eyes and a serious manner.

Even the prospect of attractive feminine company could not lift the weight of gloom. "Good evening, Doctor. Anything on your tricorder?"

"No, sir. Nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. We've checked all the instruments for damage and can find none. According to the tricorders, there's no life on this planet except for our group here."

Kirk turned away, drawing a deep breath.

"Sir - you really should be resting."

"Skip it, Doctor. I don't need a nursemaid," he said, a bit more harshly than he had intended. He felt that she was trying to assume McCoy's role and was unreasonably resentful.

Merrill stiffened at the rebuke and turned to stalk away, but at that moment her tricorder beeped urgently. She grabbed it, lifting it up to study its readings. Around the camp, others with tricorders did likewise.

"What is it?" Kirk demanded, looking over her shoulder. He knew that he owed her an apology, but decided to put it off for the moment.

"A reading, sir. An unusually powerful energy output. Life forms, I think. Humanoid. Lots of them - coming our way, from all directions."

"Dr. McCoy!" Christine Chapel called from where she stood near Zsazara's bed in sickbay.

McCoy, accompanied by Spock, hurried into the room.

"She's coming around," the Nurse informed them.

"Good." McCoy gazed up at the panel above the diagnostic bed. Humanoid readings were slowly beginning to register.

"It's almost as if there were some kind of force field about her body which is now dispersing." Chapel reached out tentatively to touch Zsazara's arm. A light current made her fingers tingle but otherwise there was no pain.

Zsazara stirred and opened her eyes to find three faces gazing down at her.

"Commander Spock. Dr. McCoy. Chris," she identified groggily.

"Welcome back, Zsa." Chapel squeezed her hand. "You had us worried for a while."

"Yes," McCoy agreed irritably. "Young lady, this jewellery of yours is going to have to be removed. Its energy output is interfering with my efforts to examine and treat you. You could have died and I would have been powerless to do anything about it."

"I am sorry, Dr. McCoy, for the inconvenience. I had not planned on any physical injuries." Zsazara reached up to touch her temple. Pain was a rare experience for her.

McCoy frowned. "What do you think you are? Indestructible?"

"As defined by your standards, I am," Zsazara confessed truthfully, without thinking, then groaned in self-reproach as she realised her mistake.

Dr. McCoy and Spock exchanged curious glances.

"Ensign - " Spock began, but was interrupted by the Cygnesian.

"Commander, sir. I must put myself on report, but ask that you delay my discipline until we have retrieved the Captain."

The Vulcan's dark eyes locked with hers. "What do you know about the Captain?" he asked in a too-controlled voice.

"Sir, I have a story to tell you, but most of that, too, must wait. Most of it is information that should not be shared just yet. However, my failure to protect the Captain has upset things considerably."

"Protect? Protect Jim from what?" McCoy demanded, sensing that she spoke of something more than her duty as a security specialist.

"A powerful enemy, once considered to be a friend of your Captain's. Gentlemen, I have a sister. She is warrior-leader of my Household. About four years and three months ago, she found two evolving Humans left for dead on the planet Delta Vega."

Spock paled visibly. "Gary Mitchell," he recalled.

Zsazara nodded and added, "And Elizabeth Dehner. We - my family - tried to help them adjust to their new powers. Elizabeth was a good student and has fitted in well with our society."

"And Gary Mitchell?" Spock asked, already suspecting the answer.

Zsazara shook her head. "M'chel rebelled and escaped our control."

The Vulcan moved to the intercom, contacted engineering and the bridge with orders. "Accelerate to Warp 8 immediately. It is vital that we return to the Epsilon Cephei system as soon as possible."

"Aye, Mr. Spock." Scott's voice held obvious dismay, but he recognised the urgency in the Vulcan's tone and knew it could mean only one thing.

"Spock?" McCoy looked from Zsazara to the Vulcan and back. "What does this mean? I've read Mitchell's psych-file and what happened to him. Is anything missing?"

The Vulcan did not answer directly, but addressed Z'N. "Mr. Mitchell, due to the mutations caused by the energy barrier, came to harbour traits of megalomania. He tried to take control of the ship, killed several crew members, and attempted to kill the Captain."

"I know, sir. M'chel has not changed in that respect. He has a great hatred and jealousy directed towards his former crewmates and Captain," Zsazara confirmed. "He feels that the Captain betrayed him as a friend. Then added to it by electing a hybrid alien to take his place." She noted his subliminal uneasiness at her words. "You, also, Commander, are in special danger."

She lifted her arms, displaying the crystal bracelets. "You and the Captain naturally share a bond, but for the most part neither of you are psionically mature enough to use it to its full potential except during a crisis. The... adjustments I had to make in order to function civilly among you may have amplified that bond beyond your - and his - capacity to deal with in this situation." Zsazara shifted her gaze to McCoy, adding, "That bond also includes you, Doctor."

"Meaning?" Spock pressed.

"M'chel is on that planet. He will take the Captain and attempt to possess and to control him. The Captain's resistance - and its resulting distress and pain - may affect the two of you. And should M'chel succeed in conquering the Captain's mind and soul..." Zsazara faltered.

"What?" McCoy demanded.

"You will lose the James T. Kirk you know."

Back on the planet, some sixth sense spoke to Elizabeth Zito.

"Captain. Sir. Please - go into the shuttle."

He glared at her, tightening his grip on the hastily-fashioned spear. They had discovered soon after the tricorder's detection of the approaching mass of life forms that the shuttle no longer worked, and that the phasers were losing power.

"What good would my being in the shuttle do, Beth?" he asked quietly.

She drew a ragged breath, shaking her head. "Probably nothing,

sir." Her thoughts drifted towards Yo, safely aboard the Enterprise. They would never meet again in this life. That realisation had settled now like a lead weight around her heart. "It's... like I can sense that something horrible is going to happen to all that I know, value and respect; and that it will all begin with something happening to you, Captain."

For a long moment, there was silence between them.

"Beth." Kirk reached out, laying a hand of comfort on her arm. He knew exactly to what she referred, for he sensed the same things. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't be here." It might be an old-fashioned thought, but he wished her back on the ship with her husband.

She looked at him with some surprise. "No, sir. This is my job. You are the one who should not be here."

Kirk found himself shivering, her words striking a nerve. The feelings from the nightmare returned and a sense of helpless terror fought to emerge. Very soon, his people would all be dead. And he would be left alone.

Alone - with what?

"Here they come!" one of the security ensigns, Talla Hones, called, hurrying back towards the shuttle.

The group took up defensive positions and waited, listening intently, staring into the darkness as the rhythmic thunder grew louder and louder.

"Sounds like a stampede," murmured one of the scientists, pushing back a strand of her long brown hair. It had come undone, but she feared to take time to put it back up.

Kirk glanced at her and realised that he couldn't even remember her name. He looked about at the rest of his people. Four women and six men, counting himself. These nine were each so young, so talented, so special. Why must they die?

The ground began to shake.

"Maybe we should all get into the shuttle," Dr. Merrill suggested, yelling above the noise, rising slightly.

Kirk shook his head, no. They would be too confined.

"But - " Merrill started to argue. She never finished.

Something bright and deadly hurled out of the darkness and buried itself in her throat.

"Oh my God, no!" One of Merrill's co-workers choked and began to pull her mentor's sprawled body back towards the shuttle.

"No!" Kirk ordered her away. "Everybody, run! In among the rocks."

Beth echoed his command, and made it a point to remain close to him as they fled.

Seconds later, the clearing filled with blinding light as the shuttle was hit by several flying projectiles. It began to burn.

Among the rocks, Kirk and the others looked back. Their one refuge, their emergency survival supplies, were now gone.

Then their attackers came into the clearing. Tall, armoured, silver bipeds milled about the clearing for only an instant before homing in on the Starfleet group's location.

"Fire!" Kirk ordered.

The men and women took aim with their phasers. As the fine pinpoint of concentrated light enveloped the biped creatures, the silver giants staggered, emitted high-pitched wails and collapsed. Yet, for every one that fell, five seemed to spring up to take its place.

"The phasers!" Beth called over the sound of battle. "They are almost drained."

Kirk nodded grimly. In less than a minute their position would be overrun. It would be nine against several hundred.

"Captain! Lt. Zito!" Roderiguez yelled.

They turned to look in the co-pilot's direction. The young officer was pushing at a large boulder near the hillside. Kirk and Beth crawled over to investigate.

"One of the projectiles hit the boulder," Roderiguez explained. "It moved and I saw a glint of light behind it."

The three put their weight against it while the other six covered them. After a moment the boulder gave and rolled away to reveal a wide entrance.

"A tunnel. An underground chamber," Beth breathed. At her insistence, she and Ryan Hope went in to investigate, leaving Kirk outside to worry until Beth returned. "It's clear, and very large," she reported.

"How far in does it go?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Tricorder readings indicate a vast underground cavern with no life forms registering."

"And it has a narrow, defensible entrance," Hope pointed out helpfully.

Kirk whirled as a scream of pain came from one of his people. Talla Hones was supporting Lt. Obec's bleeding form.

"Everyone - inside!" Kirk ordered. There was really no choice.

Half an hour passed as the group huddled in the dim light given off by the fluorescent walls.

"I don't think they're going to follow," observed Hope. "Maybe these caverns are sacred to them or something." When there was no comment to his speculation, the young ensign glanced behind him. Lt. Zito stood beside the Captain who knelt beside Obec.

"How is Tuwan?" Hope inquired.

Roderiguez, pale, pulled his gaze from Obec. "He's dead, Ryan." His voice shook. He and Obec had been good friends.

Silence and gloom settled around the group.

"Captain." Beth placed a hand on his arm. He stirred slowly, as if awakening from a trance.

More of his people had died. There were only seven left.

There must be something he could do! But what?

Kirk fought against the fog which seemed to be paralysing his thinking. Automatically, he wished for Spock's rational presence. No, he corrected himself mentally. It was better that the Vulcan not be here - to die.

"Captain." A woman's voice penetrated the fog.

"Beth?" he identified.

"Yes, Captain. Are you all right?"

Kirk looked up, straightening. "I... am as well as can be expected, Lieutenant." He rose to his feet and set his mind to the business at hand as best he could. "It looks like we are going to be here for a while. We must familiarise ourselves with this underground world. Especially, we need to search for other exits. Also food and water."

As he spoke, Kirk saw the relief and reassurance return to his people's eyes. It touched him that they were concerned about him and that in spite of that, they still needed and trusted his leadership.

They had come a long way, he and his crew. He must not fail them.

The Enterprise warped through space at her fastest speed, hurtling towards Epsilon Cephei and the planet on whose surface her Captain was marooned and in danger.

Spock sat in the command chair, his long fingers steepled before his face. Though physically on the bridge, his mind was reaching out into space, reaching for his bondbrother.

Jim.

The warm, familiar presence beckoned to him across the vast distance.

Jim!

He intensified the call, and felt the beginnings of the Human's answering awareness.

In sickbay, Zsazara fought against fidgetting and pacing. Failure was not something a Z'N handled well.

Gaez is going to break my liah crown for this, she groaned, uncrossing her legs and slipping off the bed to begin pacing. Turning a

part of her mind to register the approach of anyone, especially Chapel, who had vowed to tie the Cygnesian to the bed if she caught Zsa pacing again, Zsazara considered her options.

Now that she was recovered from M'chel's attack, Zsazara contemplated teleporting to the planet where danger threatened her captain. But no. That might provoke M'chel to rash action. As long as M'chel believed he had the time without interference to conquer Kirk, he would indulge in his favourite pastime. Prolonged mental harassment of his victim was M'chel's trademark.

Besides, she reminded herself, it will be better to wait until the ship is closer, anyway. Teleporting was not something she did well. The effort and concentration always left her nauseous.

Also, it would be better if she could take Mr. Spock and perhaps even Dr. McCoy with her. The two men were the Captain's most vital lifelines, while she was a stranger. In an all-out clash with M'chel, the strength of their bonded brotherhood would be the only chance Kirk had for survival.

Her mind was just moving on to other options when an unwelcome visitor came calling.

"Zsa!" DePaul hurried into the room and came over to embrace her.

She stiffened at his closeness, but allowed his arms to encircle her.

"Darling!" He tried to kiss her but she pulled away. He frowned, confused. "Zsa? What is it? I was so worried about you. I -"

"Sean. I would advise you to leave now. Our relationship has done enough damage." Firmly, she freed herself from his touch. For one minute, she had allowed herself to be distracted by this male and the consequences now teetered on disaster for those she had been entrusted to protect.

"Relationship? What relationship?" His harsh demanding tone jarred something ancient and deadly, deep within her. "If you behaved like a normal woman -" he began crossly, but the words died abruptly in his throat as the expression on her face and in her eyes registered. A cold chill of terror ran down his spine.

"How dare you desire me as one of your species' weak and soft females!" Zsazara hissed, her dark eyes glowing a fiery electric blue. "I am Zamarian! No male commands or moulds me. You frail-lifed Human, barely out of the cradle! How dare you tell me how to be!"

DePaul gasped, struggling with surprise and terror at her reaction. The air in the room suddenly became thick and oppressive. He backed away from the angry girl. "Zsa..."

Zsazara stood before him, eyes blazing, her beautiful features transformed into a mask of arrogance and loathing. "Perhaps I should give you a taste of your own philosophy, mortal man." She spoke contemptuously. "I believe its basic tenet is 'Let might be right. Let power rule. Let strength take whatever pleases it.'"

"Zsa -" DePaul tried again to reach something familiar in her, but his voice died and his body retreated from her advance upon him until he came up against the wall. He looked into her eyes and found himself mesmerised by the burning, piercing gaze. Vaguely he heard her

speak but could no longer focus on her words. In fact, the sounds he heard sounded very much like the growl of some great cat...

The liah jewellery on Zsazara began to glow a blinding white in protest at her mood, but she was unable to acknowledge it and respond. M'chel's attack had severed the discipline safeguards.

On the bridge, Chekov turned from the library computer scanner to report an unusually high energy reading in sickbay.

With an effort unseen by the bridge personnel, Spock pulled his mind back from the call and the reassuring awareness of his Captain's wellbeing, and focused on the young Russian's words.

Moments later, the Vulcan was calling sickbay.

McCoy walked into his office, his mind preoccupied with Ensign Z'N's medical records. He had spent the last hour studying them. It had soon become apparent that the information contained therein was false - or at least incomplete. He intended to speak to her about it as soon as possible. The Cygnetian had an incredible constitution, almost perfect. Frankly, he suspected some form of genetic engineering.

The intercom beeped and he stopped to answer.

"Sickbay. McCoy here."

"Doctor," Spock's voice said. "Internal sensors are picking up a high energy reading emanating from sickbay. Are you and the staff engaged in some experiment?"

"No, not that I - " McCoy looked towards the room assigned to the Cygnetian. An odd glow seemed to be radiating from around the corner. "Hold on a minute, Spock. I'll check it out."

The Doctor moved cautiously past the alcove and looked into the room. Sean DePaul lay pale and unconscious in the far corner. Standing over him was Zsazara, an electric blue-white glow surrounding her, radiating from her jewellery.

"Ensign!" McCoy said sharply, hurrying forward. "What's going on here? What's wrong with DePaul?" Some instinct made him stop in his tracks as the girl whirled at the sound of his voice. He gasped and fought not to turn and run at the sight of her.

He almost didn't recognise her. Zsazara faced him, her expression savage, her movements lethal, catlike. She eyed him as if he was an annoyance, one which she intended to eliminate.

"Zsa..." McCoy whispered, barely able to speak.

At the sound of her name, the girl blinked, her eyes focusing upon his face.

"Doc-tor." Her voice was deep, almost a growl.

"Yes, Zsazara. It's Dr. McCoy. Are you all right?" He spoke slowly, carefully.

"Mc-Coy." She drew a deep breath, seeming to inhale the sound of his name. "Dr. McCoy."

The glow from her jewellery began to fade. She straightened and her features began to relax into familiar lines.

McCoy found that he could breathe again. "What happened here?" he asked, beginning to move cautiously towards DePaul.

Zsazara turned, looking down. "Sean," she groaned and went to kneel beside him.

McCoy joined her and ran a scanner over DePaul. "Radiation burns?" He looked up and met Zsazara's gaze.

"Don't worry," she said, reaching out to lay a hand on DePaul's forehead. "I can undo the damage. At least the physical trauma. The psychological damage, however, may be another matter."

"What did you do to him?" McCoy wanted to know. "What happened here?"

Zsazara lifted her arms, studying her bracelets. "Sean..." Her voice faltered as she searched for words. "Sean provoked me, sir. And... my liahs have been damaged, else I would not have lost control. Apparently I am more emotionally involved with him than I had thought. It is fortunate that you came in when you did. I might have killed him."

McCoy glanced at his scanner, which showed DePaul's radiation injuries to be fading. "That... jewellery you wear. Is it responsible for this?"

"No. I am. Nevertheless, the liahs should have been able to prevent this. Now that the tampering has been discovered, correction has begun. Also, from now on, I will wear my full liah armour."

"Armour?" McCoy glanced at the jewellery. The crystals sparkled quietly about her neck and wrists.

"Yes. It was foolish of me not to be fully armoured in the first place. I must have been exhibiting subconscious prejudice because M'chel is male," Zsazara reproved herself. "M'chel would never have been able to penetrate a five-c Z'N shield. Properly armoured, I might have been able to guard the ship against teleportation away from the planet."

McCoy could only look at her. "What are you?"

"A warrior of Za - " Zsazara caught herself, correcting to, "I am a warrior of Cygnet XIV, sir."

"Somehow, Ensign, I'm positive that you are not telling me the truth," he accused.

But Zsazara merely shrugged and focused on DePaul as the lieutenant regained consciousness.

Spock had waited all of one minute before turning command over to Uhura and hurrying to sickbay. McCoy had failed to respond to any further calls, and the Vulcan was in no mood to tolerate any more apprehension for his friends.

He arrived to find McCoy and Ensign Z'N helping DePaul to a

diagnostic bed.

"Dr. McCoy." Spock gave a mental sigh of relief, but asked the illogical question anyway. "Are you all right?"

"Huh? Oh. Yes. I'm fine," McCoy replied, preparing a hypo to give to DePaul. "That 'high energy output' was none other than Ensign Z'N herself."

Zsazara straightened to attention and turned to face the Vulcan. "You need have no fear, Commander. I would never harm Dr. McCoy, or the Captain. Or you, sir."

The Doctor grumped, "That's very comforting, but hard to believe after what I saw in here a few minutes ago."

Spock locked gazes with Z'N. "Ms. Z'N. I sense that you are not being completely truthful with us."

"You can say that again," McCoy declared fervently.

Zsazara sighed and started to explain about her origins, but was interrupted by DePaul's return to consciousness.

DePaul awoke, barely suppressing a cry.

"Easy, Sean. You're all right," McCoy assured.

The lieutenant looked about wildly. His eyes found Zsazara and widened in fear.

Zsazara met his gaze solemnly, impassively. "I apologise for my earlier behaviour, Lt. DePaul. However, you were warned. When the Captain has been found and safely returned to this ship and crew, I will submit to whatever punishment and discipline is required." With that she turned away from him and faced the Vulcan. It was clear that she meant every word, especially that her first concern was to rescue the Captain *before* submitting to any disciplinary action, as required by the book.

Again Spock felt that unsettling uneasiness in the Cygnesian's presence. Of course, by now he no longer believed her to be a true Cygnesian. He had heard her make some reference to being a Zamarian. He was aware of no such province on Cygnet XIV. She spoke the name with a pride and assurance of respect. His curiosity was thoroughly aroused and he greatly desired to have it satisfied. So, too, was his desire to enforce Starfleet regulations and disciplinary action with her. He sensed a great deal of raw power in her and knew the danger of allowing such to go ungoverned.

Only Kirk's absence and great danger were able to over-ride these concerns. She knew that. And he was not Vulcan enough to deny that need and responsibility for his bondbrother in this instance. She knew that too. Perhaps he would have to put himself up, too, for disciplinary action at the end of this.

"Agreed, Ensign Z'N," he said finally. "However, when Dr. McCoy has certified you fit enough to return to duty, you will confine yourself to your quarters until we arrive at Epsilon Cephei."

"Yes, sir." Z'N turned and walked back to her bed. Settling upon

it, she awaited McCoy's examination.

McCoy took the Vulcan aside. "That's another problem in itself, Spock," he said in a quiet whisper. "That girl is more than she seems. Her medical records describe her as Cygnetian, with minor physiological variations. Minor? No way. Those variations are *major*. You should have seen what she was doing when I walked in on her and DePaul."

Spock lifted an eyebrow, his curiosity asserting itself.

At that moment, several members of the third shift entered the sickbay's outer offices. The Vulcan called them in to attend to DePaul, instructing them to move him to another room, sensing that the lieutenant had no desire to remain in the same room as the Cygnetian. That done, he steered McCoy to the privacy of the Doctor's office for a more detailed description of the girl's behaviour.

"Now, Doctor. Tell me what happened from your point of view."

McCoy shivered, recalling. "She's dangerous, Spock. There was an aura of power about her when I walked in on her attack on DePaul. I had the feeling that she wanted to... to consume him in some way. Like a... a wild animal would its prey. Or a raging fire would a chunk of coal or wood."

"Indeed," the Vulcan murmured, straightening imperceptibly. 'Raging fire'. 'Consume'. He had some familiarity with such a state of being. "And what in your opinion stopped her, Doctor?"

McCoy considered.

"Me," he said finally. "Although I don't know why or how. It almost seemed as if there was something about me that..." The Human stopped, at a loss for words.

"Something about you that soothed the raging fire within her," Spock finished, his tone almost that of a quotation.

McCoy looked at him. "A... 'kindred spirit'?" he inquired with sensitive insight.

"Perhaps," Spock admitted quietly in this moment of sharing. "All of which must wait for now. Jim is in danger. I sense the danger closing about him, seeking to possess him. She may be the only power which we have to save him."

"O.K. I understand that, Spock. I just hope she doesn't injure or kill anyone in the meantime. Remember Charlie Evans. Power without maturity and discipline. I think that is what we may have here."

Spock nodded, aware of the danger, and turned to leave. "Call me when Mr. DePaul is able to be interrogated. I wish his view of the incident also."

With a sense of dread, McCoy watched the Vulcan depart. He had no desire to re-enter the presence of the Cygnetian. Quite simply, she terrified him, and that realisation made him uncomfortably angry.

After a moment, the anger over-rode the fear. He marched back into the Cygnetian's room as if to face Death itself.

The girl sat cross-legged on the bed, her elbows resting on her knees, her hands pressed together, fingers steepled in front of her face. There was about her an aura of calm and control which belied the violence he had witnessed earlier.

"Dr. McCoy."

At the sound of his name, he almost jumped. "Er..." His courage seemed to have deserted him, but he walked determinedly to her bedside. "Yes, Ms. Z'N. It's me - your doctor," he said firmly.

She looked at him, studying him for a moment. "Doctor, you have no reason to fear me," she informed him quietly. "You have already demonstrated your authority over me when you stopped me from further harming Sean. Your presence over-rode M'chel's tampering when my liahs did not."

Her words seemed to bring him the comfort and confidence he needed to return to his usual crusty mannerism. In a short time he was giving her a severe lecture on his immunity to intimidation where the health of the crew was concerned, as well as his opinion of a young lady masquerading as something she was not.

Zsazara made no attempt to interrupt his little tirade. In fact, she found it rather relaxing, reminiscent of her own father.

Kirk moved with his people deeper into the underground cavern.

A sense of wellbeing enveloped him, in spite of the bleakness of their surroundings.

"Spock," he whispered, recognising the distant touch of the Vulcan's mind. His bondbrother lived! Therefore, the ship and the rest of his crew lived. Great joy filled him at the confirmation of this fact.

"Captain?" Beth dropped back to walk beside him. She had made it a point to keep him in the middle of the party. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes, lieutenant, I'm fine." Kirk met her gaze, his eyes warm with peace. "And so is the ship and crew."

Discerning how he had obtained this information, which reinforced her own sixth sense and feelings, Beth smiled. Her Yo lived!

Ahead, Ryan Hope banged his knee against a rock projecting out of the wall. He cursed.

"I do not like this place."

"Nor I," Rodriguez agreed.

"Let's hope there's an end to this soon," Beth murmured. "I don't like this confinement."

Kirk suddenly slowed, shivering. His feeling of well-being had just evaporated. Something had broken the link between his mind and Spock's.

"Perhaps we should go back," the nervous voice of one of the

scientists said from behind them.

"To play thunderbolts with those armoured giants?" Talla Hones retorted. "No thanks. Let's take our chances in - "

The silver giants seemed to come out of the ceiling, the floor, the walls. In seconds, the eight Humans were surrounded. Sudden blasts of energy from the giants' strange spear-weapons, mixed with the screams of the dying, overpowered Human senses.

Kirk blinked, and looked up from the floor where Beth had pushed him. Her body lay beside him, pale and lifeless. So also were the bodies of the other six.

"Why?" he asked the giants.

One of them stepped forward, reaching for him. Kirk jerked away, grabbed one of the fallen spear-weapons and rose to his feet, his back pressed against the wall.

The giant moved towards him, arm extended. He slashed at the arm, fainting before stabbing upwards, but his attempts availed him nothing.

The spear glinted off the silver armour and a powerful hand closed about his wrist. He tried to break free, but the other giants moved in. The spear was wrenched from his fingers.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Kirk yelled in anger and frustration. "Why did you kill my people?" He lashed out with hands and feet.

But the Human's attacks made no impression on their silver armoured hides.

Spock stepped into the turbolift and reached for the controls. His hand froze in mid-motion as a vision spread before his eyes on the far wall.

"Captain!" he gasped.

The Human, held between two silver-metallic giant bipeds, looked up towards the sound of his voice.

Spock. The lips formed the name. The hazel eyes, filled with pain, searched for him. *Spock! Help me!*

The silver giants turned, moving away into darkness, pulling a struggling Kirk with them.

"No! Jim!" Spock lunged after the retreating figures, reaching for the one in gold and black...

And slammed into the wall.

In sickbay, Zsazara suddenly sat up in bed, her mental focus light years away.

"Zsa?"

It was several seconds before she could disengage from the drama unfolding on the planet to focus on Christine Chapel.

"Zsa, what is it? You're so pale. Shall I call Dr. McCoy?"

"No." The Cygnetian shook her head, the dark hair with its silver highlights catching and reflecting the room's lights. "No, Chris. Dr. McCoy cannot help in this." Her dark eyes clouded with remorse and regret. "I have failed in my duty and thirty five of my crewmates are now dead. And my Captain..." Her voice trailed off.

Christine swallowed a lump of fear in her throat. "Dead? Is the Captain dead, Zsa?" Automatically, she reached over to the call button, signalling for McCoy. "How do you know these things, Zsa?" she asked quietly.

The Cygnetian sat with bowed head. "Beth. Ryan. The scientists and the others." She felt each person's pain and the departure of their life-force from the physical form. "All dead."

At that moment McCoy and Larzen entered, but stopped near the doorway to listen.

"And... the Captain?" Chapel asked again, knowing that she might have to tell Spock.

"Taken," Zsazara said. "And already M'chel taunts the Commander, baiting him to come after the Captain unprepared."

"And what kind of preparations need to be made, Zsazara?" McCoy asked, moving to stand beside her bed.

Zsazara looked up. For a long moment she just stared at the Doctor.

"The Commander will need you as an anchor, a counterbalance to his need to get to the Captain at all costs. You will have to keep him in touch with his logic, his reason."

McCoy paled, swallowing in dread. "Why? What... what is being done to Jim that would provoke Spock to lose control?"

Zsazara reached out and took McCoy's hand. "The Captain has just endured the death of all members of the landing parties. He is alone, filled with grief, guilt and fear. There is but one other living being on the planet able to offer comfort and he is the enemy. He will use the Captain's grief and guilt, intensify it beyond endurance, until the Captain loses himself and turns to him for comfort and forgetfulness. He will surrender himself to a safe haven that is not safe. The Commander, being telepathic and linked to the Captain in spirit, will be aware of this seduction, aware of the malignant personality encroachments and corruption of a mind and soul he values more than his own."

A moment of silence passed. Finally, McCoy nodded, seeing the nightmare ahead for the Vulcan, for Jim, for himself. "I will be Spock's anchor," he vowed.

Zsazara nodded, squeezing his hand gently. "And I will be the Commander's weapon of power," she declared solemnly. Then she shifted her gaze to meet Larzen's.

The security chief was still struggling to deal with the loss of over half the people in her department, many long time friends. And soon she was going to have to tell the other security personnel the news. She was going to have to tell Yo Zito and Shelly Hope that their loved ones were dead - and Angela Rodriguez would have to be told, too.

Kirk's nightmare had become reality. His people were dead and he was alone. Now he walked down a long winding corridor, dimly lit by hidden light sources.

Was he still inside the underground cavern or was this just another nightmare? Would he be shaken awake any second, opening his eyes to gaze up into the concerned features of Beth - or even Spock and Bones? He found himself praying that it might be so, and clung to this hope as he moved through the weaving, convoluted corridor of rock.

Eventually it occurred to him to question why he walked the corridor. He stopped.

Almost immediately an oozing sound began behind him. He whirled about to find the rocky surface dissolving, becoming a flowing mass of black lava.

There was nothing to do but retreat. He turned and ran.

Abruptly, the corridor branched out into several tunnels. Choosing one, he started down its length but was forced to halt as one of the silver giants materialised out of nowhere, blocking his path, spear-weapon threatening.

Again he was forced to retreat and chose another tunnel.

He was stopped by another giant.

Finally, on the fourth choice, he was permitted to proceed.

As he moved cautiously down the tunnel, Kirk's thoughts turned to Spock. For an instant after the massacre of his people, he had thought he heard the Vulcan call to him. And for an instant, it had seemed as if the Vulcan was near, reaching to comfort and protect.

Beth McCraggins, dressed in the wedding gown she had worn on the day he'd married her to Yo-Ma Zito, suddenly materialised before him.

"Beth!" he exclaimed, surprised and pleased. "Beth - I thought you were dead!" He stepped forward to touch her, to embrace her, but encountered only emptiness and a coldness that chilled him to the soul.

Alarmed, and angered by the disillusionment, he cursed and hurried on.

McCoy noticed at once the bruise on the Vulcan's forehead when Spock walked into sickbay.

"What happened to you?" the Doctor demanded, moving over to examine the swelling.

"An accident," the Vulcan said. "I was subjected to an illusion too real to ignore."

"No, Commander," Zsazara countered. "What you saw was no illusion. M'chel has taken the Captain."

Spock stood silent and motionless for a long moment, as if marshallling his control and strength. "What is to be done?" he asked her finally.

"If we are to save the Captain, we cannot wait for the Enterprise to reach the planet."

"Oh?" Larzen said. "And just how do we get to the planet before the ship?"

Zsazara looked down at her wrists, at the glittering crystal jewellery. "With these." She held up her arms. "In our cabin are two other sets of my liah armour, my liah crown and waist band. Technically, my liah crown, being a five-in-one set, has the power control capacity of the other four. However, so much power being focused through one liah can be overwhelming for one as young as I. I've never used it alone before, so we will find out on this mission what my abilities are, for these on my wrists I must give to the Commander and the Doctor. The one around my neck must be attached to the transporter. It will provide the necessary power boost to get us to the planet. My waist-band liah will have to be taken apart to enhance the life support/shield belts for all who go with us."

Kirk had no way of marking the passage of time. It seemed as if he had been walking these corridors and tunnels for hours, maybe days. Yet no hunger or thirst touched his body.

Nor had anyone or anything confronted him for a long time. He found himself almost wishing for the appearance of one of the silver giants.

Instead, the three dimensional images of Dr. Merrill, Lt. Obec and the other female security ensign (he still could not remember her name) appeared before him. But this time he was not to be deceived.

"You are dead," he addressed them, sorrow and regret tearing at his soul. "I'm sorry. So sorry! I know I'm the reason for your deaths."

Three pairs of sightless eyes in pale, lifeless faces stared back at him in accusing fashion. He endured it for as long as he could before turning away to continue his endless journey through this living nightmare.

Spock, McCoy, Larzen, and Ensign Z'N took their places on the transporter platform. Security specialists Shelly Hope, Yo-ma Zito and Chato Cougar joined them.

Chief Engineer Scott stood at the transporter controls, frowning at the alien crystal on the panel.

"I assure you, Mr. Scott, no harm will come to your machinery," Z'N told him. "The liah is its own power source. It will not tax the ship's power in any way."

"Aye, lassie, so ye keep saying, but I don't see how a crystal with no amplifiers or directional controls or containment facilities can do

all you say and not kill us all."

"Time is short, Mr. Scott," Spock intervened. "We must trust to the Ensign's technology. Every second we delay, the Captain is..." He faltered. McCoy reached out to grip his arm.

About the necks of them both were small, six-pronged crystals. The Vulcan's pulsed an agitated green, but at the Doctor's touch it steadied. Spock took a breath and continued. "Every second we delay, the Captain's life force weakens."

Scott ceased muttering and activated the transporter controls.

A silver form, indistinct but definitely humanoid, shimmered into existence before Kirk.

"Who are you?" Kirk demanded, coming to a stop. Somehow he knew this form to be the author of all that he had endured. "Why am I here? What do you want with me?"

"I am a friend," a deep voice vibrated around him. "This is a place of refuge. I understand your pain. Come. Let me comfort you, ease your guilt at the loss of your people."

"I..." Confusion and uneasiness filled Kirk's mind. His hand lifted to his temple. "I..."

"Come. Come," the voice entreated, extending silver-gloved hands. "Let me stop the pain."

That hit a nerve in Kirk, jarring him, clearing his mind somewhat. "Stop it? You caused it. Can you bring back my people? Give them back their lives?" he challenged.

"Perhaps. Join me and all of your wants and desires will become possible."

"My ship. My crew. My friends," Kirk whispered and felt a band of pressure about his head, felt his thoughts crowding within his mind, overloading his senses. "Spock..." he gasped, seeking a trusted comfort; "Bones..."

A beast-like snarl came from the silver form and it vanished.

Kirk fell to his knees, clutching his head.

The rescue party of seven from the Enterprise materialised on the seventh planet in the Epsilon Cephei star system.

While Zsazara and McCoy fought the nausea of teleportation, Spock fought a terror of his own. A force, a power of incredible strength, was chipping away at the bond he and Kirk shared.

Now that he was on the planet, he could actually feel Kirk's nearness, feel the unique dynamics of the Human's mind and spirit.

And he could also feel the malignant entity threatening to contaminate that mind and spirit.

JIM! He reached out with his mind. *Captain. I have come.*

"Commander." Z'N's voice penetrated through his concentration. "Attempting to contact the Captain is not wise at this time. He will need all his mental powers and strength to resist M'chel. For now, your mere presence here on the planet should serve to distract M'chel's attacks on the Captain."

Perceiving the wisdom of her words, Spock reluctantly ceased his efforts and focussed on the Cygnesian as she took her liah waistband apart and handed one crystal each to the six of them.

"I've attuned each of these to my liah crown to provide extra protection against M'chel's creations," Zsazara explained.

Larzen took the proffered crystal and attached it to her belt. "Are you running this show, Ensign?" she asked coolly, feeling it necessary to remind the girl who was who.

But the Cygnesian seemed to miss or ignore the rebuke. "No, Chief. That, Commander Spock must do, for it is he who has the direction and link to the Captain. And we must guard him and the Doctor with our lives, and more, if we ever hope to retrieve our Captain alive and sane," Zsazara replied solemnly.

While the security people talked, McCoy took the time to study Spock.

The Vulcan seemed to be in some kind of trance, or at least to be slipping in and out of one.

McCoy debated whether or not to intervene. He held serious misgivings about these alien crystals which they wore. He was especially worried about their effect on Spock, who was naturally telepathic and sensitive to all mind-enhancing mechanisms.

He decided to wait for a little while before getting the Vulcan's attention. Undoubtedly Spock was making some attempt to locate Jim.

He had no desire to interfere with that at some crucial moment. He determined to wait until and/or unless he felt the Vulcan to be endangering his own life, for he had no wish to lose one friend while attempting to rescue the other.

With the liah crystal about his neck, Spock took a moment to examine and explore the new world of awareness now opened to his mind and senses. His perceptions were heightened to their utmost.

There were sounds one could feel/taste/see.

There were sights one could feel/taste/hear.

The entire planet, even the very air, teemed with activity, with life, unperceived by the normal senses. Shapes, figures, life forms unknown to modern science fledged by on the edge of his sight.

There were levels of dimensions within dimensions.

Life within death.

Death within life...

Abruptly, Spock realised the danger, sensed that he was being lured, distracted by the wonders and mysteries of the yet unseen universe of supra-awareness; being distracted from recovering the Captain.

Firmly, he put aside the deep-level awareness, and focused on the bond between himself and Kirk.

The pull of that bond - its strength, its power! - made the Vulcan gasp for breath.

He and Kirk were brothers-of-the-soul. Where weakness existed in one, a strength radiated from the other to create a powerful whole.

They were one, yet two.

They were twins, yet opposites,

They were kindred spirits pledged to each other by a bond of brotherhood that had no beginning, no end.

They were -

A savage force rammed into the bondlink.

Spock screamed in his mind, in pain and rage - for he felt Kirk's distress and confusion. Every instinct and muscle propelled him to rush to his bondbrother, to find and destroy the evil entity that dared to touch this precious oneness, this priceless unity of souls.

"Spock!"

A familiar/alien voice-presence jolted its way into the Vulcan's heightened awareness.

"Spock! Are you all right? Is Jim holding out O.K. against Mitchell?"

Spock's level of awareness shifted; not far, not much. There was a similarity to, yet a difference from the bond he had with Kirk.

The voice belonged to McCoy.

This Human was a difference, an opposition that brought an odd delight and flexibility to an often too rigid mind and soul. This bond, like those he shared with family, shipmates, co-workers, interesting acquaintances, provided new ideas and concepts, served to temper the intensity of his hybrid passions, needs and desires. His bond with McCoy served especially to keep him in balance with all things, all needs, and responsibilities.

This insight into his own nature and his relationships with others filled Spock with wonder and awe. Jim Kirk was his complement, his mirror self in many ways. Leonard McCoy was his opposite, his alternate self, his challenge. Those two men, in conjunction with his family, were his foundations, his anchors to life, existence and perception.

"Bones." He focused on McCoy, his voice and manner gentle and warm, born of deep affection and gratitude. Reaching out, Spock placed a hand on the Doctor's shoulder.

McCoy frowned at this unVulcan behaviour. "Spock. Are you all right?" he asked again.

"Yes, Doctor," he assured solemnly, adding in the manner of a quotation, *"Let there be temperance in all things. Excess is non-productive, often destructive and fatal to even the most noble of causes."*

"Uh-huh," McCoy murmured, glancing hopefully at Zsazara, but the Cygnesian seemed unconcerned, conveying clearly that she felt all to be in order. His attention returned to Spock. "If you are able, Spock, I think we should go find Jim now," he said carefully.

The Vulcan nodded, his features again impassive, but the dark eyes held an expression of wonder and joy, clouded only by concern for their missing Captain and friends. "Yes, Doctor. I am able." And the expression in his eyes said clearly, *because of you*. "Let us find the Captain."

Spock let his hand drop from McCoy's shoulder and turned to the security team. "The Captain is four thousand kilometers north of this position, at an elevation of ten kilometers above this planet's average sea level." His gaze met with Z'N's. "Do you have any suggestions as to how we can cover that distance in the shortest amount of time, Ensign?"

Zsazara considered, but even as she thought, the surprise and respect she felt at the Vulcan's incredible and quick mastery of the liah's multiple power-levels could not be suppressed. She had thought it would be necessary to assist or at least instruct him in keeping his focus narrowed to one level and dimension at a time, but he had grasped the danger and necessity on his own. This unique Vulcan/Human hybrid had just put to shame many Zamarian newly-borns.

"There is a way, Commander. But to obtain it will require you to establish a rapport with a mind of fierce independence and will. Only with the consent of the Welz can we hope to ride any of her herd to M'chel's domain."

"The Welz?" Larzen questioned. "Her herd?"

"Yes. The Welz is the leader of a great herd of intelligent equines. They are a combination of your Terran legends of unicorns and pegasuses. They are winged and horned creatures of wind and fire."

The Humans and the Vulcan took a moment to digest this information.

"Where will we find these creatures, Ensign?" Spock asked.

Z'N's smile was one of challenge and amusement. "Wherever your sight and need perceives them to be, Commander."

He lifted an eyebrow in puzzlement before comprehending her meaning. "Indeed, Ms. Z'N. This psionic jewellery is most remarkable, most versatile."

"No, Commander. Not the jewellery. Just the wearer," she corrected.

The pain had finally eased. Rising to his feet, Kirk moved on. By an effort of will, he slowly forced his thoughts into a coherent order. It was clear to him now that his body was not entirely under his control. This was evident in this compulsion to keep walking. He was being led, being drawn to a confrontation with something that had

deliberately killed his people. Something that sought to possess his soul.

Yet that something or someone was the only living life force on this planet that he had been able to communicate with. It was possibly the only source to an end of the intense aloneness he felt and feared so much.

But no. Wait. Spock lived, as did his ship and crew. They would come for him. Sooner or later. He had only to wait, only to bide his time, until light, companions and freedom were his again.

"Your 'rescuers' have already arrived," that seductive voice vibrated about him.

A holograph took form before him. Spock and McCoy, accompanied by Chief Larzen, Yo-Ma Zito, Shelly Hope, Chato Cougar and Ensign Z'N moved cautiously through a forest.

"Where are they?" he asked the voice.

"Here on the planet, approaching the area where your landing parties were killed."

Kirk shivered. "What... what will they find there?"

"The same fate as the others."

"No! You can't!" Kirk said fiercely. Then, "Why? Why are you doing this? Leave them alone."

"Join me and they will be spared."

Kirk made himself take time to consider. "I've been told that my instincts are reliable when it comes to judging people, life forms, situations, intentions," he said finally. "And my instincts are telling me that there is no truth in you."

The voice issued forth a snarl and an invisible force picked the Human up and hurled him against the wall. Consciousness fled.

When it returned, Kirk found the corridor about him dissolving again. Rising, he swayed unsteadily but began to retreat from the hot liquid rock, continuing the forced journey towards his captor.

As he walked on, the lighting became worse, dimming almost to blackness. Then, abruptly, it brightened to a blinding intensity. The twists and turns in the corridor had become more narrow and bizarre.

Unexpectedly, he emerged into a wide chamber lit with a silver-milky glow. The walls and ceiling were higher than any he had passed through before. Ahead lay a silver-grey crystallised structure shaped like a Human head, with an opening near the floor resembling a gaping, fanged mouth. It sat by itself in the centre of the huge chamber.

Cautiously he approached the structure, searching for a way around it. There was movement behind him and he turned to see several silver giants approaching, spear-weapons raised menacingly. He retreated, dodged, but in the end was forced into the crystalline mouth.

The instant he stepped through the opening, it sealed itself behind him. He stood still until his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

He was not overly surprised that the opening had closed, and now took the opportunity to study the domed chamber. The floor, ceiling and walls were fashioned of some smooth, silver-grey material. He ran a hand along one curving section, following the arc to the floor. Then, with a sigh, he straightened. There was not a crack or seam of any kind connecting floor or wall. It was just one solid dome. He could no longer even find where the entrance had been.

The air was warmer in here than it had been in the corridors, bordering on the oppressive, spurring him to renew his efforts to find the exit. But there wasn't one. Except...

On the opposite side of the chamber from where he now stood there did seem to be a darker shaded area now taking form against the silver-grey. Another doorway, perhaps. Odd that he hadn't noticed it before. He retraced his steps a few paces. The doorway outline disappeared. He moved back. The doorway reappeared.

"Fascinating." He echoed an expression of his First Officer's, and moved towards it.

Less than two meters away, Kirk halted, shaking violently from an icy chill. He backed away, but the unnatural cold followed, until he was backed against the chamber wall.

Then came an odd sound, a faint, swirling noise like material brushing along a wall, dragging along a floor. It was soon joined by the ominous sound of a heartbeat. With each pulsation the light brightened and the outline of a figure in the doorway drew closer and closer.

Kirk fought down terror, not sure if his body's shaking was born of fear or the cold. Probably both, he admitted to himself. This must be another psychological ploy to weaken and off-balance his self-image and confidence. He would have to fight it.

The thing that stood in the doorway was very tall, and silver - always silver. Its eyes glowed a blazing crystal-gray-silver, focusing upon him.

Kirk knew without being told that this was the author of the voice, the murderer of his people and his captor. With a great effort of will, he curbed the shaking of his body and stood away from the wall, facing the being squarely.

"So. You are my... host."

"Yes. And you are my guest. Long have I waited for it to be so."

"Where is the rescue party? Have you killed them yet?"

"No. But then you know that already. You would 'know' if the half-breed died."

The certainty in the alien's voice concerning his special friendship with Spock bothered Kirk. "How do you know so much about me and my people? The Federation has never been in this quadrant of space before."

"You... and I... knew each other once, James T. Kirk," the being confided, almost reluctantly, almost with a touch of wistfulness.

"When? I recall no such being as you in my past."

"Long ago. In our youth. I... was much different in appearance then. Different from what I am now."

"What were you called?"

"You... called me friend - once."

Kirk took a moment to think that over. "What changed it?"

"Circumstances. Betrayal. And the half-breed."

"Spock? That's..." Kirk paused, thinking. He must tread carefully, lest this powerful creature's malignancy focus upon his First Officer exclusively.

"What were you going to say, James Kirk? That that is not possible? Oh, but it was possible and it happened. He persuaded you to fear me and urged you to destroy me - which eventually you attempted to do."

"Gary?" The alien's comments finally struck a cord in Kirk's memory.

"Ah, at last. It is a beginning, my... old friend."

"Gary. You are alive. I thought you dead." And for a moment, Kirk reflected on a long held pain. "I... grieved for you, and carried the guilt of your loss for a long time. Perhaps still. Always, I wondered if there wasn't something that I could have done to make the outcome different."

"There was." And Mitchell's voice was bitter.

And Kirk suddenly put aside his regrets, recalling all that he had gone through on this planet. "And what would that have been, Gary? It seems clear to me now that you always were obsessed by power, with little or no sense of responsibility or respect for the life and rights of others."

"What I was then is irrelevant. What I am now is all that concerns us. You think to judge me. We will see how noble and pure you remain when we are finally one."

"One? What do you mean by that?"

"Soon you and I will share mind and body."

Kirk frowned. "A mind fusion of some kind?" He recalled the special dual joining of the personalities of Spock and the Medusan Kollos.

"I see that the half-breed has educated you somewhat in matters of mind science," Mitchell observed. "Yes. There will be times when your personality, your body, will be of greater influence and effect than my own. We will share - everything, old friend."

"To what end?" Kirk chose not to think too deeply on the future Mitchell was painting for him.

"You would not ask such a question of the half-breed."

"Spock, I trust," Kirk said cuttingly.

Mitchell made a deliberate effort to control himself. He concentrated on answering Kirk's question. "The end will be to your liking."

"Really? Tell me about it."

"Power - without limit. Perhaps even over death itself, a possible rebirth of all whom you've ever loved. And a woman - perhaps the most beautiful and breathtaking in the galaxy."

"And just who is this 'woman'?"

"Her sister recently joined your crew."

"Ensign Z'N of Cygnet XIV? She has a sister?"

"Ah, yes. Lovely Zsazara. There is much you do not yet know about her, much to learn, much to master and control. It can be done. In spite of their limitless power, they have weaknesses. You simply have to make them... I - " Mitchell faltered, hesitating to admit failure. "I lack the necessary attributes to win Zsazara's sister to my side; those traits which rule the heart, the passions of the soul."

Kirk found himself chuckling in spite of the danger and seriousness of the situation. "Gary, I don't believe this. You - with all your mutated power - want me because you are having woman trouble?" Even as he spoke, the amusement faded as anger and grief reasserted themselves. "All of this - this slaying and death, because a woman has rejected you. How can anyone be so self-centred, so... blood-thirsty, so without conscience and caring!" He turned away in disgust.

Icy hands suddenly seized his shoulders from behind. The chill that enveloped his body threatened to freeze his heart.

"Enough of this talk, my old friend. It is time for us to become one."

"No!" Kirk gasped, shaking so hard that his chattering teeth almost bit his tongue. "Never. Never." He felt the beginnings of an alien mental force attempting to displace his will. Using the mental techniques that Spock had taught him, he resisted the invasion.

"You will join me, James Kirk. You will. And you will do it freely, for the power which I possess will be the only way to restore those whom you value more than your own life. That half-breed that you all friend and brother. And the doctor and your crew. And, of course, that fragile metal vessel you love so much."

The wall before Kirk dissolved into a holographic picture of the rescue party coming upon the remains of the shuttlecraft Inquirer.

"First you will see the half-breed die. Then, if that does not persuade you, I will destroy your precious Enterprise."

"No," Kirk choked, struggling helplessly against Mitchell's icy closeness, the invasion of his mind and the threats against all he loved.

The rescue party stood gazing numbly at the scene of destruction before them. The Inquirer was a gutted, charred hulk of metal.

"Was..." Yo-Ma Zito tried to speak but found it difficult. He had been told of Beth's death. It had not been necessary; he had known already. "Was this where she died?" he whispered.

"No, Mr. Zito," Spock answered, shivering slightly. "She died in the underground cavern, shielding the Captain."

The Humans looked at the First Officer with some surprise, for he spoke as if he had seen the tragedy.

The Vulcan shook himself as if awakening from a dream and began to walk along the smothering ground between the rocks and boulders.

Larzen moved to stand beside Z'N. "Your telepathic jewellery - is it allowing Mr. Spock to see what happened here?"

Zsazara nodded. "Yes. And... feel it." She shook her head in wonder. "He is extremely sensitive and gifted. We will need to hurry - not just for the Captain's sake, but for the Commander's as well. My liahs are too powerful for races not attuned to them from infancy. They open mental doors and pathways few can master, much less comprehend."

Spock led the group to the entrance of the underground cave among the boulders. "Below - in the clearing near the Inquirer - is the body of Dr. Merrill. Just within the entrance here is the body of Lt. Obec. Inside here - an estimated point six kilometers down - you will find the bodies of Lt. Elizabeth Zito, Ensign Ryan Hope and the others."

"Spock," McCoy interrupted. "Enough. We need to find Jim. We can recover the bodies of our dead later."

Slowly, Spock turned to look at McCoy. After a moment, he looked past the Doctor to Shelly Hope and Yo-Ma Zito. "I had thought you might wish the time to reclaim and bury your dead before following me to rescue the Captain," he said simply.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Shelly said quietly. "But we..." She glanced at Zito, who nodded ever so slightly in agreement. "We know our duty, our priorities. The living must come first, else the sacrifice of our dead was for nothing."

Gratitude shone in the Vulcan's eyes. For a time he had feared a replay of the Galileo incident - the Humans' almost-obsession with proper burial rites for the dead. An obsession which, here, would have deprived them of much needed, valuable time. "Thank you, Ms. Hope, Mr. Zito," he replied solemnly.

McCoy drew a breath. "O.K. Now, how do we go about locating these intelligent, flying horses?" He looked from Spock to Zsazara and back.

In answer, Spock settled his lean frame into the yoga position of meditation and steeped his fingers before his face.

"We must wait," Zsazara explained. "We must stand guard and be very quiet and still."

She directed McCoy to sit on Spock's left, while she took a stance of alertness on his right. The others formed a circle about the three.

Spock visualised as best he could the creature Z'N had described. Childhood memories of his mother's Terran children's picture books

helped immensely.

What is such a creature as you called? he wondered curiously.

The thought took wing and spread across the planet, finally coming to the attention of the one it was meant for.

I AM THE WELZ. MY PEOPLE ARE THE GALE, THE WIND. WHO INQUIRES?

Spock. A son of Vulcan and Earth.

AN ALIEN. There was wariness and dislike in the mind-tone.

Yes. I am alien, not only to this world, but also to those to which I belong.

INDEED. INTERESTING. WHO ARE YOU? WHY ARE YOU HERE? Now there was curiosity in the mind-voice.

I am a scientist, a seeker of knowledge and wisdom and understanding. I am here because someone I value has been taken from me.

I ALSO FIND JOY IN LEARNING, EXPERIENCING, SPOCK OF VULCAN/EARTH. AND I ALSO HAVE THOSE I VALUE. PERHAPS... WE ARE KINDRED SPIRITS. LET ME WARN YOU; THERE IS ANOTHER ALIEN WHO LIVES ON THIS WORLD. HE IS CHAOS. HE IS DESTRUCTION. HE IS DISORDER. HE TAMPERS WITH AND ABUSES THE ESTABLISHED NATURE OF THINGS. HE SICKENS THIS WORLD, EVEN TO THE ELEMENTS. BEWARE OF HIM.

I cannot. It is he who has taken the one I value.

There were fleeting moments of silence, mixed with the sensation of investigation. THE FRAGILE ALIENS FROM THE VESSEL OF METAL WHICH ONCE CIRCLED THE WORLD. YOU ARE ONE OF THEM... YET NOT.

Yes.

SEVERAL OF THE FRAGILE ALIENS WERE UPON THE WORLD EARLIER, BUT THE UNNATURAL ONE DESTROYED ALL OF THEM BUT ONE. THE ONE YOU SEEK?

Yes.

AND THERE ARE SEVERAL MORE UPON THE PLANET NOW, WITH YOU. ALSO THERE IS ONE WHO IS NOT FRAGILE, BUT POSSESSED OF GREAT POWER. INEXPERIENCED POWER. POWER THAT REMINDS ME OF THE UNNATURAL ONE'S. INTERESTING.

Spock found the creature's observations intriguing, but felt impatient at the time being lost. *Welz. I must find the one the Unnatural One has taken, quickly. To do so, I require your help.*

IF YOU GO NEAR THE UNNATURAL ONE HE WILL DESTROY YOU. ALSO, IF HE HAS YOUR VALUED ONE ALIVE, IT WILL PROBABLY BE BEYOND YOUR RECOGNITION BY THE TIME YOU GET TO IT.

No. Not if haste is made. My Valued One is very strong-willed. He can resist the Unnatural One for a time. He is resisting, but he is being weakened. I must get to him, join him. Together we may be able to defeat this unnatural being. Perhaps he and I may even be able to free, not only ourselves, but this world as well.

WHAT YOU WILL DO IS DIE. The creature's mind-voice was certain - and concerned.

Perhaps. But for the one I value, I am willing to do even that.

Again there was silence from the creature, mixed with a sensation of consideration. THIS ONE YOU VALUE. HE IS A WELZ, AND YOU ARE HIS WING COMPANION?

Discerning the meaning of the unfamiliar terms, Spock answered, *Yes.*

NY IS MY WING COMPANION. The mind-voice became musing.

My Welz is called Kirk Spock informed the creature, sensing the importance of name exchange. To reveal the identity of those you valued to another was an expression of trust, for you were in effect giving that person the secret of how to hurt you the deepest.

SEPARATION FROM NY IS ALWAYS DIFFICULT, EVEN AT MATE-TIME, WHEN FAMILY CONCERNS TAKE PRECEDENCE.

I can... understand, Welz.

There was another silence while the creature reflected. YOU MAY RIDE NY, SPOCK. MY BACK SHALL BE SAVED FOR YOUR WELZ, YOUR KIRK. I SHALL CARRY HIM TO SAFETY AND PROTECT HIM FROM ALL HARM. AGREED?

For a long moment Spock could not speak, only convey his gratitude. *Agreed, Welz. How soon can you come to us?*

YOU WILL HAVE NEED OF SIX MORE OF MY PEOPLE, I PERCEIVE. BY THE TIME YOUR MIND HAS RETURNED TO ITS LESSER SIGHT, I WILL BE WITH YOU.

Thank you, Welz. I await your arrival.

AND I ANTICIPATE OUR MEETING IN THE FLESH, SPOCK.

The telepathic communication ended, and the Vulcan began the difficult task of return.

Larzen and her four co-workers stood watch over their First Officer and the Doctor, casting anxious glances at the rocky landscape about them.

It was getting darker. A cold mist began to form around them

"Dr. McCoy?" Zsazara called softly.

He looked up, startled by her voice, so silent had it been since the Vulcan had gone into his trance.

"Yes, Ensign?" he whispered.

"Stay with the Commander, sir. You will need your phaser. And please activate your belt shield and the Commander's."

He obeyed. "Trouble?" he asked, and peered about, but he could see nothing threatening.

It was Larzen who answered. "Yes. Figures. About ten, among the rocks."

"Pseudo-men," Zsazara identified. "Creations of M'chel's. He has

tampered with the elements of creation, forming man-like creatures without self-will or self-action, able to perform but one function at a time."

"Now let me guess what that function is," Larzen said. "This group's one function is to kill."

"Correct."

The five specialists checked their phasers and activated their shield-belts.

"Their main objective will be to destroy the Commander," Zsazara told her crewmates. "Perhaps Dr. McCoy also."

"All right," Larzen said. "Zito, Hope, Cougar and I will be the first line of defence. You, Zsa, with your special 'skills' are the last line of defence. If we fall, you will have the responsibility of getting Mr. Spock and the Doctor to safety."

"Understood, Chief." Zsazara paused for a moment. "The power of my liahs be with you, to protect you, Dee."

Larzen threw her a grateful glance of friendship, just as the pseudo-men began to rise from the rocks and boulders. Everyone took aim, but -

"Oh my God!" Zito exclaimed.

His outcry of distress was echoed by the others. The pseudo-men moving towards them were in the shape of the bodies of their dead shipmates. One of them, who bore the form of Ryan Hope, hurtled a bolt of light. It impacted against Shelly's shield, knocking her to the ground.

"Fire!" Larzen ordered. "Fire! They're not real!" Her phaser hummed, its concentrated focus of energy engulfing the Ryan figure, which disintegrated slowly.

Cougar, knowing that Zito would probably be immobilised by the Beth figure, fired at it, beseeching God to help and forgive him.

Zito screamed. "Beth! No!" But began to fire at the other pseudo figures.

The odds, however, were fifty to one. More and more of the pseudo creatures began to appear, hurtling lightning bolts of energy at the rescue group. Only the shield-belts, their power enhanced by Zsazara's liahs, saved the five security specialists from immediate death.

"Zsa! How long can we keep this up?" Larzen yelled.

"Unknown. My liah-power is disciplined, M'chel's power is not - and without limit here in his own domain."

"Well, we've got to do something. Is Mr. Spock able to be moved yet?"

Zsazara glanced at the Commander. The Vulcan was slowly stirring, returning from his psionic journey. McCoy knelt protectively by him, ready to block any bolt of energy threatening Spock.

"Soon, Chief. Soon."

The pseudo-men suddenly increased the ferocity of their attack, pressing in on the group. The light energy in the clearing became blinding.

"I... can't see!" Shelly Hope yelled, hesitating in her aim for fear of hitting one of her team-mates.

Then from out of the sky dropped huge dark shapes. Ear-splitting screams rent the air about the group, some of death, some of challenge.

After a time, Human eyes began to make out the shape of horse-like creatures, their powerful legs plummeting the pseudo-men into the ground; wide, sweeping wings bowling dozens off balance; great, blade-sharp horns impaling and tossing the silver giants in all direction.

In seconds, the battle was over.

The Humans looked about them in disbelief and wonder.

"The pegazoids," Zsazara said. "The Commander was able to reach them and establish a rapport with the herd queen."

One of the horse-creatures, a large, magnificent specimen with a black sable coat, trotted towards the group, its liquid brown eyes searching their faces.

The Vulcan's eyes opened slowly as he came out of the trance. "Spock," McCoy greeted, relieved.

With easy grace, the First Officer rose to his feet. His eyes met those of the great black pegazoid.

"Greetings, Welz," he intoned solemnly.

The great mare emitted a soft, whinny-like sound and stepped forward.

Spock moved through the protective circle about him and went to the winged creature, laying a gentle hand on her wide forehead next to the menacing horn which protruded from its centre. Several seconds passed with the Vulcan and the pegazoid so situated. Then Spock let his hand drop and he turned to the rescue team.

"Our transportation to where the Captain is being held, ladies and gentlemen," he announced.

In his domed crystalline prison, Kirk drew a shuddering breath of relief. Mitchell, on the other hand, began to curse in a language which sounded like harsh chords of music. Unthinkingly, he flung Kirk aside.

"...truly she is Gaezara's sister! How dare she spread her liah power so thin and still control it so well! It should not be possible for one so young and inexperienced!" Mitchell growled.

Kirk, momentarily stunned by the impact with the wall, sat up slowly. "Having more woman trouble, Gary?" he asked cuttingly. "Have you unexpectedly met your match?"

"Silence!" Mitchell roared, and Kirk shrank away from the volume of the entity's emotional outburst.

"You can't hurt Spock and the others because of Ensign Z'N's jewellery, can you?" Kirk had noticed the crystals about Spock's and McCoy's necks and those on the life support belts of the security team.

"Be silent, mortal!" Mitchell's tone was calmer, but no less deadly. "No liah protects *you* - or your precious ship." A silver gloved hand gestured towards the wall and the scene of the rescue party mounting the winged horse creatures with horns dissolved into an image of space and a great silver starship.

"The Enterprise," Kirk whispered, fear once again encircling his heart.

"I will set its engines to explode," Mitchell said, "one hour from now. None of your people, or your technology, will be able to prevent it. Only you. Only if you join me will your ship and crew exist an hour from now."

Kirk rose shakily to his feet, leaning against the wall, and stared at the image-projection of his ship.

"One hour," Mitchell repeated and withdrew through the dark opening.

Kirk could not see or hear anything indicating the opening or closing of the exit through which Mitchell had departed, yet he sensed that he was alone again, sealed in a chamber which might become his tomb.

His gaze returned to the image-projection, and he stared longingly at his beloved silver lady, wishing with all his heart to be aboard her among his crew. *The best crew in the Fleet*, he told himself with pride.

Slowly, he sank to his knees. *Hurry, Spock*, he sent mentally. *Hurry!*

A great white horned mare trotted up to stand beside the Welz and sniff at the strange two-legged creature called 'Spock'.

THIS IS NY, the Welz informed Spock. MY WING COMPANION.

The Vulcan stepped forward, raising his hand in the U-salute of peace and long life.

Ny shook her head, snow white mane falling about her neck in silky waves. After a moment she lowered her head and folded her wings. Cautiously, Spock approached, grasped the thick mane then leapt lightly upon her back. The powerful body beneath him trembled, and Spock sensed Ny's mental efforts to suppress the instinct to buck him off. He reached out to her with his mind and his heart, conveying apology and the urgency of his need to find his brother/friend. This Ny could understand, for the Welz was her sister/friend. The trembling ceased.

The Vulcan relaxed and looked down at the Humans and the Cygnesian. "We ride!" he commanded. "But take care. The pegazoids are intelligent creatures. Treat them accordingly. Allowing you upon their backs is the same to them as your allowing a stranger - a potential enemy and slaver - inside your own physical defences."

The rescue party nodded their understanding. Each selected a mount and approached it cautiously, murmuring words of peace and entreaty.

McCoy gathered his courage and moved towards the giant black. He swallowed nervously, trying to force down the lump in his throat. Terran horses he was used to, but a horse that flew and wielded a nasty-looking sharp horn in the centre of its forehead was something else entirely.

"No, Bones," Spock called to him. "The Welz is for Jim alone."

The Welz whinnied, and a brown-coated mare with large, deer-like eyes trotted up to McCoy, wings folded in invitation. Somehow, to the Doctor's perceptions, this one was not as intimidating as the great black.

MY DAUGHTER, Ny told Spock. HER NAME IS RELLA.

"Doctor. Your mount's name is Rella."

McCoy nodded and approached the pegazoid, calling her by name as he gripped her mane and pulled himself up on her back. He settled down carefully, half expecting to be thrown off any second.

"Think of it this way, Doctor," Larzen, already on the back of a big gray, called. "It beats the transporter. No need to worry about your molecules being scattered."

"True," McCoy answered, but muttered, "Now all I have to worry about is having my molecules pulverised in a fall from the sky." He was pointedly ignoring the trampled bodies of the slain pseudo-men a few meters away.

Ny stamped her left front leg impatiently, reflecting her rider's unspoken emotion. Spock, too, decided it was time. He glanced about, making sure all the rescue party was mounted.

"Let's go!" he commanded and locked gazes with the Welz.

The great black let out a loud, long piercing whistle, which seemed to vibrate through their souls.

The pegazoids moved as one, the Welz in the lead, setting off at a swift trot which soon became a canter, then a swift pounding rush.

The breeze in the riders' faces became a gale, then a hurricane. They gripped the manes and bodies of their mounts with hands and legs, holding on for dear life.

A mental instruction came to them from Zsazara. Activate life support belts. Then lean onto your mount's neck to cut down wind resistance. Let the pegazoids lead. They follow the Welz, and she follows Mr. Spock's homing bond to the Captain.

The planet's landscape became a blur around them as the pegazoids increased speed even more.

Commander. Zsazara's mind-voice touched the Vulcan only. M'Chel has set the Enterprise's engines to explode in fifty minutes if the Captain does not submit to him.

I know it, Spock's mind-voice answered hollowly.

Then Zsazara understood. The Vulcan now had a difficult, almost impossible choice; to save his Captain or to return and save the ship and crew. He had full understanding of where his military duty lay

versus his personal responsibility; also he knew what he would face in Kirk, should the Enterprise be lost.

Commander - when we reach the Captain, you and he and Dr. McCoy will have to go back to the transportation site. There you must reach with your mind for the liah on the ship's transporter console. It will lock onto the liahs you wear and pull you back to the Enterprise.

What of the Captain? He wears no liah.

Have him between you and the Doctor. As an extra precaution, perhaps the three of you should be mentally linked. Once back aboard the ship, take the three liahs and put them into the matter/antimatter units. They will absorb all excess energy outputs harmful to mortal life.

She felt the Vulcan's wondering comprehension, the questions, the curiosity, the desire to understand and apply. Then -

Ensign - what of you and the others?

The Chief and the rest of us will have to remain here to distract and hold M'chel. He will seek out the Captain's life - and yours - rather than allow your brotherhood to continue.

Very well, Ensign. There was a pause, then, Will you be able to... survive Mitchell?

M'chel has no power to harm me. However, if the power of my liahs falters before the conflict is ended, there will be no survival for the Chief and the others, she explained.

Then the Chief and the others will have to be told of that possibility before this plan is accepted.

Of course, sir.

The rescue party, shielded by the life support fields of their belts, had just begun to relax somewhat upon the backs of their mounts when the ground dropped away from beneath the pounding hoofs of the pegazoids.

"Whoaaa!" McCoy let out a plaintive cry of alarm, but Rella opened her wings and tucked her legs close against her body, gliding smoothly, effortlessly, into the air. Around them the other pegazoids and riders did the same.

If heights distress you, Doctor, don't look down. Close your eyes, Zsazara suggested, then sent the suggestion to the others.

But eventually, nobody did. The powerful bodies beneath them were steady and secure, the great sweeping wings like the reassuring material mass of a glider or parachute.

Soon the land beneath them changed from that of flat plains to one rocky and mountainous. The party winged towards the highest mountain, a high projection of rock with abnormally smooth sides and jutting overhangs. Its bulk shone a dull silver grey.

The Welz and her herd-sisters slowed to a leisurely glide.

Spock and Zsazara drew their phasers. Ny and the Ensign's mount

swept in close to the silvery-gray surface. Vulcan and Cygnetian fired, making a wide spread of concentrated energy, weakening the protective barrier. It took three fly-by attempts before the silver-gray faded and an opening became visible.

Larzen and the others kept watch, an act which saved their lives. Gaps began to slide silently aside on the mountain's surface. Pseudo-men stood silhouetted in the openings, spear-weapons raised.

"Look out!" Shelly Hope yelled and urged her mount in front of McCoy and Rella as one of the silver giants aimed and fired at the Doctor.

The weapon's energy hit Hope's mount in the side, below the wing. Squealing in pain and anger, the pegazoid balked and dipped, folding one of her wings while the stunned muscles recovered.

Hope was taken by surprise. She lost her grip and fell, screaming.

"Shelly!" Larzen, Cougar and Zito yelled. Each wanted to send their mount after the plunging woman, but the need to remain and protect the First Officer and Dr. McCoy held them.

"My God!" McCoy cried, and tried to urge Rella after Hope, but the mare refused. McCoy was her charge, her responsibility, no other. Hope belonged to Krella, Rella's twin.

Krella folded her other wing, reassessed the mass of her body to the planet's gravity, and dropped like a stone. The pegazoid hurtled towards the falling woman, the greater mass overtaking and passing Hope. Once below the Human, Krella opened her wings, still favouring the injured muscles. She negated gravity degree by degree, slowing into a wide, spiralling circle, until she was directly under Hope.

The African woman landed upon the back of the pegazoid with a thud that took what little breath she still had away.

"My God!" Hope gasped when she was able to breathe again, and clutched at the pegazoid with hands and legs. "Thank you!" she said - both to God and the winged creature.

Krella nickered her apologies at having lost Hope and began her ascent back to the others.

By the time they arrived, Spock and Zsazara had enlarged the opening, while Larzen, Cougar and Zito eliminated any pseudo-men that appeared in the openings.

The Welz led the way into the mountain, her powerful wings and hoofs downing the group of pseudo-men that rushed forward to stop the group. The other pegazoids glided into the opening one by one, their legs unfolding to let hoofs touch down with light clattering on the gray surface interior of the mountain.

Quickly the rescue team dismounted, hurrying to get between the pegazoids and the pseudo-men. The Welz, having taken most of the weapon fire, swayed. Ny and Rella moved to support their leader and absorb some of the deadly energy.

"How do they do that?" Spock asked in wonder, firing at a pseudo-man taking aim at the pegazoids.

"Their biological makeup has a higher radiation tolerance," Zsazara

explained simply. "Like mine."

SPOCK. The Welz's mind-voice came into his mind. MY SISTERS AND I WILL WAIT FOR YOU HERE. WE ARE TOO LARGE TO WALK THE PATH YOU MUST TAKE TO YOUR WELZ.

Understood. And thank you. Will you be all right?

YES. MY SISTERS AND I WILL TAKE TURNS FACING THE ENERGY WEAPONS SO AS NOT TO TAX OUR METABOLIC ABSORPTION CAPACITY. GOOD HUNTING, SPOCK OF VULCAN/EARTH. I AWAIT YOUR RETURN WITH YOUR BROTHER/LEADER, YOUR WELZ.

The rescue party moved forward, dealing with pseudo-men every step of the way. Spock kept McCoy close beside him, while the five security specialists moved about them in a tight circle, Ensign Z'N leading.

The large chamber eventually narrowed down to a corridor-like tunnel, three meters high, one meter wide. They entered in single file. Zsazara went first, then Spock, McCoy, Hope, Zito, Cougar and Larzen.

"Do we have to go this way?" Cougar complained.

"Yes," Spock answered. "The Captain is being held straight ahead, an estimated point eight kilometer."

Cougar shook his head in wonder. "That liah must be a top-rate sensor device."

"It can be," Zsazara commented. "But not in this instance."

Then they understood.

With or without the liah, the Vulcan could find the Captain.

The rescue party encountered less and less resistance as they moved deeper into the mountain.

"What's happening?" Zito wondered. "Is the worst over?"

"No. The worst has yet to be faced," Zsazara informed them all.

"Mitchell," Zito remembered, his voice hardening. He had known the Enterprise's former chief navigator for several years before the tragic encounter with the energy barrier. While not close friends, they had shared a few shore leaves, together with Lee Kelso.

But Lee Kelso *had* been a good friend - and Mitchell had killed him.

Now, years later, the same mutated personality had seemingly come back from the dead to take his beloved wife as well as more friends - including his Captain.

"We are near," Spock whispered.

Ensign Z'N held up her hand and the group slowed behind her. The corridor-like tunnel opened suddenly into a large chamber with a high ceiling arcing overhead. In the centre stood a silver-gray crystalline structure shaped like a Human head.

"Mitchell," Zito mumbled, recognising the features. "An egoist to

the end."

"Is that his profile?" Hope asked.

Zito nodded. "A bit exaggerated, but his."

Spock, too, saw the resemblance and felt the presence of a powerful, oppressive mind. His mental sensitivities shrank from this place, desired to be elsewhere. But within that structure was a person whose well-being meant everything to him.

T'hy'la, I am here.

Unconsciously, he reached back and gripped McCoy's arm. "Doctor. Stand ready. Chief Larzen?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Guard Dr. McCoy. I must go the rest of the way alone."

Larzen looked from the Vulcan to Zsazara questioningly, not liking the idea of letting the First Officer go ahead alone. But the Cygnetian nodded, conveying that it was for the best. Not for the first time since the beginning of this mission the security chief felt a twinge of resentment towards Zsazara, but being a realist she knew the Cygnetian's knowledge and abilities to be superior to hers in this instance. "Very well, Mr. Spock."

And in Spock's mind, Zsazara spoke. Quickly, Commander. All of my power must be with you in order to protect you and help you break through to the Captain.

Leaving Dr. McCoy and the others unprotected. I understand.

Spock moved forward towards the domed structure, his features taking on an expression of intense concentration. His hands came together, the slender fingers meeting in a point for a moment. Then he reached out to lay his hands against the crystalline structure, his eyes becoming slightly glazed as the mental effort began.

A terrible vibration shook the chamber, causing the rescue party to struggle to stay on their feet.

"What is it, an earthquake?" Larzen wanted to know.

"No," Zsazara answered. "The Commander is using psionic energy to punch a hole in M'chel's stronghold."

"Why don't we use the phasers?"

The Cygnetian shook her head. "That crystalline material would merely absorb the phaser beams, heating the interior. The Captain would suffocate and be cooked like a piece of meat in that oven."

"Won't this attract Mitchell?" Zito asked.

"M'chel knows that we are here. He has known all our movements since we arrived on the planet. He waits now in hopes that the Commander will exhaust my liah power before freeing the Captain, or drains it enough for our defences to become weak and vulnerable to penetration."

"What are the chances of that happening?" McCoy wanted to know, never taking his eyes off the Vulcan. Spock was beginning to look pale

and drawn, unsteady.

"A distinct possibility, Doctor," the Cygnetian told him honestly. Already she was beginning to feel the sensation of light-headedness, her subconscious focus on vital necessities - like corporeal stability sufficient to accomodate her physical self and the life force of her companions - wavering.

Kirk, still on his knees, was leaning against the circular wall, staring helplessly at the holograph picture of Scott and the engineering staff in their desperate efforts to locate and stop whatever was building up the ship's engines to the explosion.

He didn't think he could take much more of this. For a time he had tried closing his eyes and covering his ears, but the images/sounds of his crew's distress still continued to penetrate to his soul.

He heard one of the technicians report to Scott that there was twenty-five minutes left until annihilation.

Then the scene switched to that of Uhura and Chapel on the bridge...

"At least we have the hope that the Captain, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and the others may survive, thanks to Zsa's special jewellery," the Communication Officer's lovely voice reflected. He had always loved the tonal quality of Uhura's voice, whether it was at her station or giving a song.

"Yes," Chapel agreed. And Kirk clearly read her expression to be one of deep emotion for Spock. He had often wondered whether or not it would be too intrusive of him to try and bring her and the Vulcan together. Though he had never voiced it, he held a deep concern for Spock's well-being when next that Time of Mating arose for his Vulcan friend.

But apart from all of this was the simple fact that he considered almost all of the members of his crew to be special friends and shipmates in all their varied individuality. And the thought of them dying when they were so close to mission's end became suddenly unendurable...

"No more," Kirk whispered, and was about to call out to Mitchell when a familiar, beloved presence flooded his mind with a comforting message of hope.

Brother of my heart. I am here.

"Spock!" he exclaimed and jumped to his feet.

The structure which imprisoned him began to vibrate. Kirk fought to stay on his feet, tried to locate the source of the disturbance, fearful of Mitchell's return any moment.

Spock leaned against the crystalline surface, pushing against it as if he could physically go through its solidness to his Captain's side. Exhaustion of mind and body consumed him. Self-preservation bade him rest, but he dared not. The Cygnetian's warning marched through his thoughts over and over.

M'chel will seek the Captain's life - and yours - rather than allow your brotherhood to continue.

He had to penetrate this barrier - and quickly. He had to get to Kirk. Each second this wall separated them, Mitchell could be hurting, tormenting Jim in some way which might be beyond healing. Perhaps, even worse, he could break through and find only a living body with the dynamic, sensitive mind which he valued gone, destroyed and replaced by that of an alien mutant.

"No!" the Vulcan cried out against such an outcome. "No, Jim! Hold on. Hold on! I am coming!"

Kirk leapt back as a section of the wall imploded in front of him. Shards of crystal fell about him and he raised an arm to shield his face. A crack appeared, enlarging rapidly as chunks of the wall fell away.

Then a tall, lean figure seemed to topple through the opening into the chamber.

"Spock!" Kirk exclaimed, moving forward quickly to help the Vulcan to his feet.

"Jim!" Spock gasped, and momentarily put aside proper Vulcan behaviour to embrace the Human.

Kirk returned the embrace. "Spock. I'm so glad to see you! You're all right. The others?"

"Outside, sir." Spock began to reclaim his composure. "Come." He turned, keeping a firm grip on Kirk's arm.

Kirk followed willingly, eagerly. "Never did like being alone in the dark," he murmured. Then memory made him hesitate. He half turned back to look at the wall. "Spock - the ship. Gary has set the engines to explode."

"I know. We must hurry."

"Gary said nothing we can do will stop it, that our technology would be useless. Only if I surrender to him..."

"Our technology may be powerless against his, but Ensign Z'N's power is not. A most remarkable young lady. Come."

The two men climbed over the rubble of the shattered wall, out into the larger chamber where they were greeted by McCoy and the others.

"Jim!"

McCoy rushed forward, embracing Kirk. "Thank God we've found you! Are you all right? Let me look at you. Where's that blasted scanner..." He fumbled with his medikit. "Spock, I want to look at you, too. All this mental activity is beginning to show on your face. You're as white as a - "

"Later, Dr. McCoy," the Cygnetian interrupted. "There is no time. The three of you must hurry back to the pegazoids. They will take you back to the transportation site, where you can teleport to the ship."

"Oh, yes. Of course." McCoy recalled the need for urgency. His hands let go of the medikit and reached to take Kirk's other arm.

"Wait a minute." Kirk stopped as Spock and McCoy started to led him out of the chamber. He looked at Larzen and the others.

"We remain, Captain," the security chief explained, "to cover your escape."

"Oh, no!" Kirk protested at once. "I've lost too many of my people already, seen them die horribly protecting me. No more. We all go together or not at all."

"Captain," Spock said urgently. "This is necessary. We three must get back to the Enterprise in order to use Ensign Z'N's power crystals to stop Mitchell's sabotage."

Kirk looked at the crystals around Spock's and McCoy's necks, then at the crystal headband worn by Zsazara. "You will take care of my people and yourself, Ms. Z'N," he said in the manner of command which, nevertheless, held the hint of a plea.

"Yes, Captain." Cygnetician and Human Commander held gazes for a moment.

Then an ear-splitting roar of rage and challenge shook the chamber, freezing all of them.

Zsazara whirled and backed away from the crystalline structure, herding Larzen and the others behind her. "M'chel. He comes, Commander, Doctor. Get the Captain away. Hurry!" the Cygnetician shouted.

The officers obeyed, however reluctantly. Each felt it his place to stay and face the impending conflict with the security team. Only the danger to four hundred other lives caused them to make this uncharacteristic retreat.

A silver-gray bolt of lightning shot out of the crystalline structure, slamming Zsazara squarely in the chest. She staggered but did not fall. The Humans shielded their eyes at the blinding flash, and aimed their phasers.

"Fools!" Mitchell's voice vibrated around them. "Do you think to stop me with your puny energy weapons?" Suddenly his tall silver frame stood in the opening.

Without hesitation, Hope and Zito fired. Larzen, Cougar and Z'N joined in.

Mitchell cried out in rage and pain, retreating back into the dome. "How much longer do you think to keep this up, Zsazara?" he growled. "Your power/control is perilously low. Have you informed your comrades of your true nature when control for your kind fails, Daughter of Death?"

"They are aware of the consequences," the Cygnetician replied.

"Are they really? Did you tell them of the dangers only from me, and not from yourself?"

"I will do nothing to them. They are my shipmates, my sister and brother warriors."

"Sister? Brother? Mere mortals? Ha! You will kill the women and consume the men when your control is no more and you revert back to what you really are - Black Widow!"

"What's he talking about?" whispered Cougar.

Larzen, too, felt her curiosity piqued, but whispered, "Ssh. We have to keep Mitchell distracted, keep him here whatever it takes."

In front of them, Zsazara felt immense gratitude towards her warrior chief for her refusal to be distracted by M'chel's accusations and for the personal support.

Spock led the way back through the corridors, moving as quickly as Kirk and McCoy could go. Both Humans' endurance had been sorely taxed during this mission. Even his own was somewhat frayed. Yet, having the two with him, alive and whole, did much to restore his physical and mental stamina.

Kirk walked close behind the Vulcan, resisting the urge to reach out and touch the lean blue-clad back just to reassure himself of Spock's actuality. And not only the Vulcan but the Doctor as well. Unconsciously, he did reach back to McCoy.

"Bones. You should be in front of me. If we're attacked by those silver giants..."

"No, Jim. I stay back here. You have no life support belt reinforced with Zsazara's liah."

"The Doctor is correct, Captain. Whatever happens, stay between us," Spock said. "And both of you stay close to me."

Both Humans raised an eyebrow at the Vulcan's tone of command.

"Mr. Spock," Kirk began in mild formality and reproof.

But McCoy placed a silencing hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Later, Jim. I'm sure he has his reasons. Zsazara's psionic jewellery has him functioning at an incredibly high mental level. And he's been so worried about you."

Kirk felt some surprise at McCoy's insight. "Oh, I see. And what is this... psionic jewellery... doing to you?"

"Nothing much that I've noticed, except..." The Doctor's voice dropped ever so slightly. "Except perhaps to keep me attuned to and in emotional control of Spock."

"What?!" Kirk glanced back incredulously.

At that moment, the rock floor parted beneath their feet.

The hairline crack in the floor ran from one wall to the other. It opened noiselessly and quickly, but some sixth sense warned Spock. He whirled, grabbing desperately for Kirk. But Kirk, in fighting for

balance and to help McCoy, fell out of his grip.

The two Humans slid downwards, scrambling for handholds with feet and hands, but finding none in the smooth, curving surface.

"Captain! Doctor!" Spock shouted, and started to jump in after them, knowing that this attempt at separation was deliberate and would be fatal. But the gap was already closing.

"Spock, no!" Kirk, looking up, discerned the Vulcan's intention. "Don't! You'll be crushed!"

His Captain's command voice automatically caused Spock to hesitate - one second too long. The gap slammed shut.

"No!" Spock cried, slamming his fists on the rock floor.

Below, in the lower tunnel, McCoy was picking himself up, grumbling in irritation. "Blasted rock. It's supposed to be solid," when from the corner of his eye he saw movement. "The pseudo-men! Jim, watch out!" He threw himself at Kirk, knocking the Captain down and taking the full impact of the weapon's energy beam.

"Bones!" Kirk cried in alarm. Quickly, he grabbed the Doctor's phaser and fired at the silver giants marching relentlessly towards them. Somehow he knew their intent this time was to kill him.

The Doctor, momentarily stunned, stirred groggily. "Jim..."

"Here. Beside you. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I just got the wind knocked out of me." He sat up stiffly. "That and ten years off my life! I keep forgetting Zsazara's power shield. I thought for sure I was done for."

More of the pseudo-men appeared, and McCoy pushed Kirk behind him.

"Use me as a shield," he instructed as Kirk began to fire.

"Bones, are you sure that shield will hold?" Kirk destroyed three more of the silver giants before they could fire their weapons.

"Actually, no. Zsazara did say something about her power level becoming low."

Kirk cursed softly. "We've got to do something. We can't just sit here."

"We don't dare move, Jim. At least, not far. Spock is above, and he's frantic. If he finds a way to break through and we aren't here..."

"O.K. Not far," Kirk promised, grabbing the Doctor and pulling him around a nearby corner.

Above, Spock's phaser burned into the rock surface, making absolutely no impression whatsoever. He fought to suppress panic and increased the power of the phaser. So intent was he on his task, he neither heard nor sensed the arrival of three pseudo-men who took aim at his kneeling form.

A shrill whistle of challenge and death made him turn.

The pseudo-men, intent on his destruction, had no chance to flee from the great black whirlwind of muscle and hoofs.

SPOCK. The Welz spoke in his mind. I SENSED YOUR DISTRESS AND CAME. YOU HAVE LOST YOUR BROTHER/COMPANIONS?

"Yes. They are below this rock surface and are under attack."

The pegazoid came forward, her head to the floor, nostrils flared. She followed some unknown trail to the far wall, turned and began to pound it with her hind legs.

There was a rumbling sound of protest but a crack reappeared in the floor and spread apart - almost too slowly for Spock, who slipped through to the corridor below with barely enough room for his lean form.

The Vulcan dropped between the Humans and the pseudo-men, his liah-shield now absorbing the weapon fire. Grimly, he lashed out with hands and feet, using deadly unarmed combat moves to eliminate these enemies. He knew that time was running out - for the Cygnesian's power, for the Enterprise, for them all.

"Spock!" Kirk exclaimed at the sight of him. McCoy, too, let out a cheer.

Then the Welz dropped in, her great black form crushing several of the pseudo-men to the ground.

The Vulcan broke out of the melee and joined his Humans.

With Spock safely out of the way, the Welz became a whirlwind of death among the pseudo-men. In seconds it was over. Snorting in satisfaction, she trotted over to where the three men stood.

"What is that?" Kirk asked, taking in the horse-like body adorned with horn and wings. He had seen the holographs of the creatures, but seeing one in the flesh was still startling.

"A friend, Captain," Spock answered solemnly, and stepped forward to greet her.

For the third time Mitchell retreated, rage filling his mind - and defeat.

Zsazara's power control was faltering and weakening - very weak, comparatively speaking, for a Z'N. Yet even at this level she was more than a match for his power. And that fact - that she, a mere child, a mere female child, held power superior to his - infuriated him; humiliated him.

And then there was Kirk - and that half-breed.

Mitchell had used a great amount of power taking Kirk and holding him, for the Captain's defenders had been many. And there had been the effort to break down and control Kirk's incredible will and spirit. All of this requiring great power.

Mitchell raged. It was not possible or right that these weak-fleshed mortals be so indomitable, so self-sacrificing.

Yet they had been; and still were.

In spite of his rage, Mitchell was no fool. He knew that he was defeated, for the time being at least. And he knew what Zsazara was preparing to do.

That, he most certainly could not survive.

It was time to flee.

EPILOGUE

The nightmare seemed to end for them all as abruptly as it had begun.

Zsazara, on the verge of control breakdown, was just preparing to send an emergency telepathic call home to her sister and family, alerting them to M'chel's whereabouts - and her failure - when the malignant power output ceased and M'chel's mental and physical pattern vanished.

Utter silence filled the chamber and a dimness settled about them as the great expenditure of energy output died down.

"What happened?" Larzen asked, then hurried to catch Zsazara, who swayed and almost fell flat on her face.

"My God," Cougar whispered, looking round. "I think we won!"

"Yes," the Cygnetian confirmed wearily. "Yes."

"Mitchell is destroyed?" Zito inquired, turning to grasp Shelly Hope's hand. If the fight was truly over, they would soon be free to deal fully with their grief. Though it had not been spoken, they would mourn together, offering whatever comfort and solace they could, each to the other, for they were friends, both to those lost and to each other. A glance from Larzen and Cougar, also promised that the two would not be alone.

"No. M'chel is not destroyed. Merely gone," Zsazara explained. "He has left this planet, probably even this dimensional space/time continuum. He fears my sister greatly, and does not wish a confrontation with her. At least, not without the Captain as a bargaining tool."

"Oh?" Larzen looked at the Cygnetian, finally free to give voice and time to her curiosity and suspicions. "And just what is this business with my captain and your sister? Who is this sister of yours anyway? Your file tape has no information on any relatives."

Zsazara sighed. "It's a long, complicated story, Chief. I will tell you later if I must, but right now we need to get out of here. I am exhausted, and..." A chunk of the ceiling suddenly fell near the group. Then another, larger, piece. And another.

"I think this place is beginning to fall apart," Hope observed.

"It is. M'chel is gone. Now all of his creations are beginning to disintegrate." Zsazara took a deep breath and straightened away from Larzen's support. "Let's go. If we are quick, we can rejoin the Captain, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy."

The group hurried back the way they had come as dust began to rain down on them and the rocky surface began to shift beneath their feet.

SPOCK. THE UNNATURAL ONE IS GONE, the Welz informed the Vulcan.

Yes. I sense the clearing of the psionic atmosphere. Spock looked at Kirk and McCoy. "It is over. Mitchell is gone," he told them.

"Dead?" Kirk asked.

"No."

The Captain drew a deep breath, shuddering slightly.

"You O.K., Jim?" McCoy already had his medikit and scanner in hand.

"I'll make it," Kirk said. "We're losing valuable time. The ship -"

"Is safe now," Spock informed him. "The crystal connected to the transporter console can now call upon all of the Ensign's psionic power to stop the engines from exploding."

The relief that filled him was like an immense weight lifted from Kirk's mind and body. Abruptly, he sat on the floor. Unexpectedly, Spock joined him.

McCoy swept his scanner over both of them, shaking his head. "The minute we get back to the ship, I'm confining both of you to sickbay where you will stay for at least a week."

"You'll get no argument here, Bones," Kirk told him, his mind already turning to the anticipated joy of being aboard his ship again, among her crew.

Spock nodded, also in agreement, steeping his fingers before his face. Though the sensation was gradual, he clearly felt the closing down of the multi-level awareness he had found since putting on the liah crystal.

SPOCK?

Yes, Welz?

I SENSE YOU WITHDRAWING.

Yes. My telepathic powers were being enhanced for this mission. Now that it is over, my mind is returning to its normal level of awareness. I must bid you farewell. And thank you. I am forever in your debt.

OUR RAPPORT MUST END?

Yes. I am primarily a touch telepath. I cannot maintain mental communication over a distance for any length of time.

I WAS NOT AWARE THAT OUR RAPPORT WAS TAXING UPON YOU. I WILL MAKE ADJUSTMENTS WITHIN MYSELF. MY MIND POWER IS SUFFICIENT FOR OUR COMMUNICATION WITHOUT ANY EFFORT ON YOUR PART NOW THAT I KNOW YOUR MENTAL PATTERN AND 'FEEL'. ALSO, WE MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE. IT WAS CREATED BY THE UNNATURAL ONE AND NOW THAT HE IS GONE IT IS DISINTEGRATING.

Indeed, the mountain was beginning to shake violently, increasing in intensity. Chunks of rock began to fall about them.

QUICKLY. UPON MY BACK.

The Vulcan scrambled to his feet and hurried the Humans up onto the broad back of the great pegazoid. Then, with a slight flutter of her wings and a powerful surge of her hind legs, she leaped upwards to the corridor above them.

"I don't believe this!" Kirk breathed, gripping the mane and body of the powerful creature.

"Wait until she flies with you on her back!" McCoy retorted.

The Welz trotted quickly through the corridor, heading for the exit and her herd-sisters. She deftly avoided the heavy chunks of rock that fell and lightly jumped or glided over others on the floor.

Halfway to the exit, they met up with the other pegazoids, who, like the Welz, had gone in search of their newly-found alien riders. Larzen and the four security specialists sat astride their respective mounts, though the Cygnesian looked as if she might fall off hers at any moment.

"Captain! Mr. Spock, Doctor," Larzen greeted.

"I'm glad to see that you're all safe," Kirk told them. He cast a worried glance at Zsazara.

"She's O.K.," Larzen said. "She's just tired. She assures us that she's perfectly capable of sleeping without falling off while on horseback."

"And while in flight too?" McCoy challenged sceptically. He started to dismount as Ny and Rella moved quickly over to the Welz to claim their riders.

"I want to look over Z'N properly," McCoy protested.

"Later, Bones. Right now we need to get out of here!" Kirk yelled as the ceiling, walls and floor all started to disintegrate around them. "Let's go. Now!" he ordered, and pressed his legs firmly into the great black mare's sides.

The Welz shook her dark head, snorted an order to her own people, and bolted. The other pegazoids followed.

The group burst out into the open blue sky and brown-green land moments before the entire mountain collapsed in on itself.

Great wings of black, white, gray, brown and red spread and soared into the clear morning air and sky.

"Freedom feels absolutely wonderful!" Kirk called joyously, and

patted the silky black neck beneath his hands.

The Welz whistled and tossed her head in agreement. SPOCK! I LIKE YOUR BROTHER/LEADER! she sent to the Vulcan, luxuriating in the caressing touch of the Human's hands upon her and the easy weight of his body on her back.

Mentally, the Vulcan smiled, for he had expected nothing less.